

## Baptized to Begin

Last Friday was the Day of Epiphany. This ended the 12 days of Christmas and began the season of Epiphany. In general terms, an epiphany is a revealing - a realization of something big, some universal truth, an awareness of this reality that was previously unknown. During this season of Epiphany, we will be having readings that reveal Jesus as being God's Son. The readings, and especially the Gospels, are such that we get a glimpse of the nature of Jesus.

Now, the story of Jesus being baptized raises many questions. Among them are: Why did Jesus need to be baptized? Does this mean that He sinned? I think the danger here in trying to answer these questions is that we project back to the 1<sup>st</sup> Century our 21<sup>st</sup> Century understanding of baptism. An understanding that says that baptism is for the forgiveness of sins. However, that is not the understanding of baptism in Jesus' time. We need to understand the concept of baptism (or ritual washing or immersion) from the 1<sup>st</sup> Century point of view. With that, we can better understand why Jesus felt He needed to be baptized.

In the Jewish tradition, ritual washing was done in order to purify one's body for religious practices. Priests had to undergo ritual washing in order to properly perform their duties. Women had to take a ritual bath on a monthly basis. Converts to Judaism had to be immersed in a bath when becoming a Jew to show that they were casting away their old ways. John the Baptist pushed this understanding of ritual cleansing of an outward, physical cleansing to be a cleansing of the heart - of repenting of one's sins and seeking to reorient one's self, thoughts and actions toward God. Jesus, for His part, pushed this understanding even further in that we now understand baptism for the forgiveness of sins. However, by the 1<sup>st</sup> Century understanding of baptism, when Jesus said, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in

this way to fulfill all righteousness" we could conclude that He was baptized so that He was properly prepared for His ministry which will eventually lead Him to the cross.

Further discussions regarding baptism, though interesting would only distract us at this time from seeing what God is doing in the text. This should be our primary focus for what a text means for us - to see what God is doing. First, we see that God is pleased with His Son and we haven't really heard anything that Jesus did of significance. The only thing of significance that we could say that Jesus did was simply to obey and follow God's will. Contrast this with our attitudes when we state our pleasure in our children. We usually don't praise them just for following our rules, we show our appreciation for them after they had done something like cleaning up their rooms or passing an important test in school. We are pleased with our children after they have done something.

The second thing to notice is that the heavens were opened to Jesus. Another way of translating this is that they were opened 'for' Jesus. At that time it was believed that there was a firmament that separated heaven from earth, which was a barrier between God and the people. By opening this firmament, there now is direct access to God through Jesus. Even though God spoke to the Israelites through the prophets, this is something new, something different. God now can speak directly to us, through the divinity of Jesus. Because of Jesus living as a human, God can relate to us on a personal level.

The last thing we can see here is that God is establishing a new creation through Jesus. In John's Gospel account John poetically talks of how creation came into being by the word of God and God declaring each part of creation as 'good.' John then tells us that this Word is Jesus and that like the original creation that was made through Jesus, a new creation is also being made through Jesus.

There are many ramifications that this has for us. Among them are that we know that simply by being a child of God, God is pleased with us and through our baptism, we are in a special relationship with God through Jesus. We don't have to worry about doing 'the right' things in order to achieve our salvation. As Peter noted in Acts 10, simply believing that Jesus gives us forgiveness of our sins and the promise of eternal life is enough. However, that doesn't mean that we can just sit back and not do anything. Just as receiving recognition for what we have done spurs us to do more, knowing that God is pleased with us should motivate us to want to follow God's will, to live a life as taught to us by Jesus. For example, we don't have to worry if we get 'loving our neighbor' wrong, we have the assurance that God is still pleased with us. We can take the chance of living our lives like we are not the center of the universe and everything revolves around us and is here for our benefit, but that we see also in the other person that they are a child of God and that they have needs that we can provide help to them. We also are freed to forgive others and to ask for forgiveness. Just as JC has restored our relationship with God through forgiveness, we can restore relationships with others through the power of forgiveness. Finally, by being a child of God through Jesus, we are not limited to who we are by how others define us or by what we do. We are a child of the creator God and if God has assured us that He is pleased with us, then that should be enough for us.

May you remember your baptism in Jesus every morning, reminding yourself that you are a child of God and may the Holy Spirit help you to see those whom you meet as a child of God as well, and may you begin each day to live the life to which God has called you through your baptism.

YouTube links:

Gospel and Sermon: <https://youtu.be/jrAj274FgqI>

Service: <https://youtu.be/ABoKPGcsaOA>