

The Baptism of the Lord

It was only a few weeks ago in Advent that we encountered John the Baptist. He was in the wilderness outside of Jerusalem, proclaiming the way of the Lord and baptising people for the repentance of sins. This Sunday, we return to John and go down by the riverside.

In our mind's eye we see a very strange character. He is, perhaps, rough, weather worn and strangely dressed. He is not what most people would call a professional. There is nothing polished about him. Nevertheless, he is surrounded by people. St Mark writes that the whole Judean countryside was there. Farming people, country people, good people. St Mark also writes that not only was the Judean countryside there, but also many people from Jerusalem. Merchants, craftsmen, labourers. Men, women and children. In addition there were also the religious types – Priests, Levites, Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes and Zealots.



What was happening was a call to preparation and repentance. This strange person was saying new things. He was telling people to 'prepare the way of the Lord'. God was about to do something extraordinary and people should turn from their old ways and show that they had repented by submitting themselves to baptism. Baptism was not unfamiliar to the Hebrew people. It already existed as a ritual for cleansing and still does today. John's baptism was different. This was a baptism 'for the repentance of sins'. So it is that Jesus arrives at the River Jordan and is baptised by John. Immediately, there is a problem. We must ask ourselves why this happened. Why was Jesus baptised? Jesus is without sin. Why was he baptised for the repentance of sins?

The reason is summed up in the word 'solidarity'. By his baptism, Christ united himself to all the people who were being baptised by John and through our baptism we are united to him. It's St Paul who puts it most clearly:

'Do you not know that all who were baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death. Therefore, we were buried together with him through baptism into his death, so that just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too can walk in newness of life. If we were united together in a death like his, we will also be united together in a resurrection like his. (Romans 6:3-5).

By our baptism we are united to our Lord and by this union we have all the benefits of his grace and goodness towards us. Christ was baptised for the forgiveness of sins, but not for the forgiveness of his sin, he was baptised for the forgiveness of our sins.

St Mark goes on to tell us that on coming up out of the water, Jesus saw the heaven open, the Spirit like a dove coming down upon him and a voice from heaven which said:

'You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased.'

This is astounding news for us. It means that if we are united to Christ by virtue of our baptism, then we too are made sons and daughters of God. We are his beloved children in whom he is well pleased. In these difficult days when we face anxiety, nervousness, doubt and despair, we can take comfort in the fact that there is one who stands beside us and with whom we are united. We will overcome because he has overcome all the anxiety, nervousness, doubt and despair which we experience.