



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Baptism of the Lord – Year C

Come to the Jordan and see the Trinity

Readings: Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11, Ps 103, Titus 2: 11-14, 3: 4-7, Luke 3: 15-16, 21-22

For most of us the experience of Baptism is necessarily second hand. At least, that is to say that, we cannot recall our own and we ship up at family celebrations which are a mixture of holy chaos, organising the ignorant and un-churched relatives and coping with child management issues. It is all very jolly and lovely but almost inevitably loses something of the grandeur, dignity and profound consequence of the sacramental reality. It is no easy liturgical task for the priest, I can assure you, and not a few, under such pressure, allow the sacred to be sacrificed to the sentimental. So it is good to be reminded annually, as we set out on a new calendar year, of what we are truly about in this sacrament and how it will define everything we do in the Christian Life thereafter.

We encounter the Baptist at work in the Jordan, that place that signals the crossing of the Chosen People in to the Promised Land. We are told that the people are consumed by a feeling of expectancy and hope. They believe that the Messiah, the Saviour long expected is imminent. Expectancy and hope are hallmarks of the community of faith.

(They are correct but they have, as John points out, identified the wrong person.)

We do not get the full story in Luke but we know from other gospels that John did not want to baptise the Sinless One but Jesus had insisted. He did so for a variety of reasons. First He must walk the path of His fellow Man. He must pass through the waters – of which more in a moment. He must, by His holy presence sanctify the waters that will become the passing place of believers from death to life.

He must reveal the reality of who He truly is. So we learn, in all the Synoptic Gospels, that it is at this moment that the nature of God is revealed. The Holy Spirit is seen descending on the Son who is affirmed by the voice of the Father. As St. Augustine wrote, 'Come to the Jordan and see the Trinity'. It is in the threefold name of the One true God that believers will be baptised ever after.

The waters, for the believer, are indeed the crossing point into the Land of Promise. But they are not just about the Jordan. They also recall the crossing of the Red Sea by the fleeing Hebrews and the destruction of the pursuing hordes by the power of God their Redeemer. They are an act of faith on the part of those setting out for Heaven and seeking to be the People of God.

Water stands for death. The ancient world never forgot the terminal judgement of God in the waters of the Flood. We pass through the waters of death and are freed from sin and death by the intervention of God Our Saviour. We are taken down into the waters of death with Christ so that we may share His risen and eternal life with the Father. The road to Heaven passes through the Calvary, through the sacrificial death of the Son

of God, Jesus. We, in baptism, are 'plunged', for that is what the word means, into the death and resurrection of Christ.

In His radiant purity the stain of sin is washed away.

What is going on in this sacrament which, in its simplicity, almost disguises a staggering transcendent reality, is life changing and can never be repeated.

Listen to what the Catechism says about this amazing adventure: *'Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (vitae spiritualis ianua), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission.'*

The man of sin dies in Christ to be raised up in Him. The 'bath of enlightenment', as St. John Chrysostom calls it, cleanses us and restores to our rightful mind, made in the image of God.

The newly baptised Christian is then anointed, Christened (for this is what it means), as a sign that he is a follower of Christ and as a seal of the Holy Spirit who has descended upon him.

Remember the signs. The Holy Spirit is seen to descend on Christ at the Jordan in the form of a dove. It is the dove who, amid the destruction, death and ruin of the cataclysm, brings the olive branch to Noah to tell him that judgement is ended and that the survivors, the occupants of the great ark that will symbolise the Church, can begin again.

It is this same sign that defends the faithful in Christ from condemnation at the final judgement. There is an echo of this deliverance in the Eucharistic prayer of the Roman Canon: 'Order our days in your peace and command that we be delivered from eternal damnation and counted among the flock you have chosen.' It is into this salvation from utter destruction that we are gathered at Baptism.

The newly baptised is swathed in a white robe – a symbol of putting on the righteousness of Christ for in His righteousness alone can we stand before the terrible holiness of the Father.

And the new Christian is given a light, lit from the Paschal Candle, the sign of the Risen Christ that is brought into the church in the pre-dawn dark of Easter Day. Each Christian draws his light from the Lux Mundi, the light of the world, Jesus Christ – crucified, risen, ascended, glorified. And each Christian must, duty bound in love, bear that light into the world to bring others to a knowledge of the love of God in Jesus Christ Our Lord.

In Baptism the soul is marked forever by the love of God and sent out on the heavenward road.

The great mission of the Church is rekindled on the altar of the heart of each new believer and it is our job, as friends and family, in prayer, encouragement, education and example, to ensure that it never goes out.

CCC 1215 This sacrament is also called "*the washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit*," for it signifies and actually brings about the birth of water and the Spirit without which no one "can enter the kingdom of God."**216**