

The Baptism of the Lord

January 12, 2025

Readings

Is 42:1-4, 6-7 *or* Is 40:1-5, 9-11

Ps 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10 *or* Ps 104:1b-2, 3-4, 24-25, 27-28, 29-30

Acts 10:34-38 *or* Ti 2:11-14; 3:4-7

Lk 3:15-16, 21-22

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A new season has begun in the time of the Church and the Liturgy turns a page in the Gospel to show a crowd moving through a desert landscape in search of God's grace, a word of truth and guidance for a better life. The crowd comes to the riverbank where the prophet is baptizing with the ritual of the ages. The scene has an ambiance of solemn austerity, while John speaks of repentance and a change of heart, as if humanity were at the beginning of a revelation. He draws from a treasure of ancient wisdom to call attention to God's plan that corrects human expectations about the Messiah (Lk 3:15) and to recognize the One who is in their midst. Jesus has trodden the dusty earth coming to be baptized and is also there, mingled with the motley crowd.

In the transcendent language of prophecy, it is the "fulfillment of time," and we are invited to situate ourselves there, not as mere spectators but as eager participants, actors in the drama of the sacred narrative. That is no minor task because it compels us to step away from the great illusions of our new age. They easily mesmerize the crowds and rob us of the capacity to see beyond our evanescent present and ponder the meaning of Christ's abiding lesson. In our day, more than ever, we move in a cloud of denial of transcendence, swirling around influencers and drowning in a deluge of trivial slogans.

In contrast, here we find “the humble Jesus” that amazed Augustine who, in his scholarly arrogance, wondered “what his weakness had to teach.”¹ He was lost in a vast land of unhappiness, in the time of ignorance, and walking far from God.² But he found “the way that leads there”³ through conversion, insisted on the need to return from the dispersion of life to our interior self.⁴ He pointed out, inspired by the words of a psalm:

We must descend to the depths from which we must cry out to God⁵ ... Our depth is our present life, over which looms the shadow of death. If we understand how deep it is where we are, then we cry out, groan, and sigh until we are rescued from our deep place and begin to make our way towards him who beholds all depths.⁶

That brings us close to the mystery of this One who, to fulfil God’s plan, will descend into the waters “and be baptized too” (Lk 3:21). Then, we stretch out our attention as Jesus ascends and prays in profound silence. It is described with great simplicity but, in the long unfolding of sacred history, marks a new covenant in which he is the Mediator between God and all human beings who “carry around the signs of mortality.”⁷

This event is also the beginning of his journey throughout the land. Jesus has been sent to announce good news, giving the people testimony of the Truth that will move their hearts to repent and believe (Mk 1:15). And to those who came along and accepted his words and deeds, the prophet said: “He will baptize you by the Holy Spirit and fire” (Lk 3:16). St Paul, who experienced the power of that statement, explains: “We, who were baptized into Christ Jesus,

¹*Confessions* (VII,18,24)

²*Ibid.* (III 6, 11)

³*Ibid.* (VII, 21,27)

⁴*Ibid.* (I, 18,28)

⁵*Ibid.* (II, 3,5)

⁶*Expositions on Psalms* 129 v.1-3.1

⁷*Confessions* (I,1,1)

were baptized into his death ... So that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life, not by sight but by faith” (Rom 6: 3-9; 2 Cor 5:7).

We are witness to a sacred ritual with a movement of “descending to ascend” that points to a necessary spiritual death to produce a new life (Jn 12:24). Like the grain of wheat, we must go to the ground of our interior self and empty it of disordered love, delusions and attachments that thrive in our human condition.

The experience is hard facing the seductive inventions of the world. We hear that happiness is in the present, a humdrum that flows through all the resources that shape our daily life. It challenges a shaky will to respond to the call of our vocation that urges to take off the garments of the old self and “clothe ourselves with Christ” (Galatians 3:27). A decision that requires to let go of the ways of living that are “like broken jars that cannot contain water” (Jer 2:13), summon our total will to begin the task, and plunge into the river of God’s mercy.

Augustine says that to descend and die with Christ means to “fling ourselves down upon him, so that he may arise and lift us up.”⁸ And so, we ascend with him, cleansed by his grace and the love of God “poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit given to us” (Rom 5:5). That is the inner liberation brought by the “clearing his threshing floor,” the passing from darkness to light.

The story of Christ the chosen and beloved son of God (Lk 3:22) which the Liturgy unfolds and re-enacts in the sacred moments of our time, enters our lives and becomes our story. It brings us, through listening and reflection, to the knowledge of Christ and the call to

⁸Ibid. (VII,18,24)

discipleship with him. Thus, we draw meaning from the mystery of God's grace to each one of us with the assurance that "we who are baptized in Christ, though many, are one body in Christ" (Rom 12:5).

When the gospel is read in the assembly of the faithful, we stand and listen, allowing the sacred Word to illumine our minds. Thus, its power transforms all events throughout the seasons of worship into a loving memory of his timeless presence amongst us (Mt 18:20). Augustine gathers us in prayer as we make our pilgrimage of hope:

In the morning, I shall stand and see my God.
who sheds the light of salvation in my face,
who will breathe life even into our mortal bodies
through the Spirit who dwells in us,
and has been mercifully hovering
over the dark chaos of our inner being.
By this we have received, even in our pilgrim way,
the pledge that we are children of the light already.
Saved only in hope we may be,
but we are at home in the light and in the day.
No longer are we children of the night or of darkness,
as we once were.⁹

It is a journey by faith, and as we move forward through the years, the Gospel will remind us that the meaning of its message will realize fully at the end of all our stories, because "Christ is alpha and omega, the beginning and the end" (Rev 22:13). He is the Truth that speaks in our hearts.¹⁰ And we say with one voice: *I believe*.

⁹Ibid. (XIII,14,15)

¹⁰Ibid. (IX, 8,10)