Homily for the Baptism of the Lord 2026 Year A

Having a mature faith means that we should not be afraid to ask questions and sometimes listen critically to such things as the Gospel, and today's Gospel is a good example.

It is the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, and, having listened to the Gospel, we have this familiar mental image of Christ standing head bowed in the Jordan, John the Baptist pouring the water and the Holy Spirit hovering overhead.

But what on Earth is going on?

What was this Baptism and what was Christ doing?

Let's look at the Baptism first.

The ritual of Baptism was common to most Middle Eastern religions and religious sects.

The person wishing to join, after a period of preparation, was usually immersed in water, often totally submerged, and they were then ritually made clean.

The element of water was important because it was highly symbolic, especially in the warm, dry, Middle Eastern climate. Water was essential for life. Water was essential for the growth of food and crops. What was dry and arid could be turned into a fertile Oasis. It was used to wash off the dust and dirt of the day.

On the negative side, water could also kill and destroy. One could drown in water. Floods could bring chaos and destruction. In many of the creation stories of mid-Eastern religions, the God or Gods created anew out of a flood.

So, the act of walking into water and being totally immersed, and then walking out again had a powerful meaning, both for those undergoing the ritual, and for those watching.

It marked the dividing line, a new beginning, a new commitment. One symbolically rose up out of the chaos and disorder of one’s old form of life, cleansed, nourished and refreshed and starting something anew.

It marked a whole new beginning, a clean break from the old, and many priests, profits or holy men required this ritual Baptism for those who followed them.

It was an outward sign of an inward change of heart.

John the Baptist was such a person. He preached the imminent coming of the Messiah. He asked people to repent and change their lives in preparation for this great event, and as a sign of this, he baptised them.

Now, there, quite suddenly, was Jesus, the Christ, humbly entering the water before John.

What was he doing?

Jesus was sinless, He didn't need to repent and change his life. He wasn't about to join any religious sect. So what was the point of it all?

I think it is important to realise that John's Baptism of Jesus was not the sacramental baptism that we experience and understand today.

John himself admits it, “Another greater than I am is to come, and He will baptise with fire and the Holy Spirit”. John’s Baptism was simply an outward sign of an interior disposition. It didn't forgive sins or affect any change in the person. It signified that the person themselves had decided to change. Jesus, by requesting and submitting to John’s Baptism, was using an outward sign familiar to people to say something.

What was he saying?

The clue I think is found in John’s own account of the same event.

As Jesus approaches John, he points to him and says, “Look, there is the Lamb of God who takes away the Sins of the world”.

The idea of a sacrificial lamb or scapegoat was very familiar to the Jews.

Once a year they would symbolically cast all their sins in a specific ceremony upon a specially chosen lamb or goat, the scapegoat. It was then forced out into the desert wilderness to die, and they believed that their sins died with it.

So, Christ’s role was to be something similar. Though he was sinless, yet publicly acknowledged as “Agnus Dei”, the Lamb of God, He symbolically took the sins of mankind upon his shoulders, went down into the waters of the

Jordan the symbol of chaos and death. He then rose up out of that water, cleansed, refreshed and renewed.

By doing this Jesus was saying this is now a whole new beginning for all those who would listen to my words and follow me.

As a sign of this you will undergo what I have just undergone, Baptism by water.

No longer will it be just by water, it will now also be accompanied by the Holy Spirit, and it will change you. No longer the old Adam, you will die to Sin and inherit the promise of eternal life.

It is not just you simply deciding to change, you will be helped by the grace imparted to you in your Baptism. You become a new person in Christ.

For us, then, the feast of the Baptism of the Lord in a real sense, commemorates the institution of the Sacrament of Baptism as we know and receive it. No longer just a symbolic ritual, but a symbolic ritual that imparts a real change.

Just as Christ in his Baptism showed his solidarity with Man, by bearing his sins, so we too in Baptism become one with Christ. We become members of the Body of Christ, not just as a single event, but as a whole new beginning, a new person, to be lived and relived throughout our whole lives.

Each year we personally renew the solemn promises taken by our parents and Godparents at our Baptism at the Easter Liturgy.

It is a great pity that most of us restrict that to just once a year.

It could be an enormous help and encouragement to our own spiritual lives if we renewed those promises in private more often.

It would also perhaps raise our awareness of the value and significance of Baptism, and indeed, our own Baptism.

And that is what we will do now…..