

**Second Sunday after the Epiphany - Our Lord's Baptism**  
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“And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan.”

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.  
Amen.

The feast of the Epiphany, and this season of Epiphany-tide in which we now find ourselves, commemorates three principle showings of God to mankind, what we call “theophanies”: the visit of the Magi, Christ’s Baptism in the river Jordan, and his first miracle at Cana. It is of happy design that our Mass lectionary provides for the reading of the Gospels pertaining to each of these events on the Sundays following Epiphany. I suspect for most of us, there are readily discernible meanings to the visit of the Wise Men and the changing of the water into wine; the former being the first revelation of Christ to the Gentiles, that is, to those who are not by nature inheritors of the Hebrew promises; and the latter demonstrating the efficacy of Our Lady’s intercession with her Son, as well as foreshadowing the Eucharistic transformation of wine into the Precious Blood of Our Saviour.

But Christ's Baptism by St. John often elicits a certain amount of perplexity, regardless of whether one approaches this story from a Catholic or Protestant perspective; we, as Catholics, know that Baptism effects a real spiritual cleansing from sin; many of our Protestant brethren, especially here in the Evangelical South, think Baptism is merely an outward symbol of one's interior contrition: in either case, why is it that the One who knew no sin—indeed, as the Church has always taught, *could not* sin on account of his Divine Nature—would submit himself to a Baptism for the repentance of sins? To make sense of this mystery, we must read the accounts of Our Lord's Baptism in the light of two other foundational events in the Scriptures.

“In the beginning,” Genesis tells us, “God created the heaven and the earth; And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters; and God spoke.” The creation of the world is realized through Water, the Spirit, and the Voice of God. Centuries later, after the influence of the Evil One had corrupted the world and subjected humanity to violence and death, it is decreed that this old world must end. Once again, as the waters prevail upon the earth, God sends forth his Spirit over the waters, and order is brought to chaos. Noah, anticipating that a new world is dawning, sends forth a dove from the ark, and she returns to him with the branch of an olive tree. God then speaks a promise to Noah and his descendants that never again shall he destroy the world by water. A

new creation, and a new promise—by Water, the Spirit, and the Voice of God.

And thus through long ages we come to this present moment. The Jewish people, roused by the preaching of John, are flocking to the waters of the Jordan in order to receive a Baptism which can indeed excite a sorrow for sin, but cannot effect its forgiveness. The Word of God—who spake the Heavens into existence and declared his promise of everlasting mercy to Noah—the Son of Mary, who clothed his Divinity with flesh—the one whom the Magi confessed by their gifts of mystic meaning to be at once God, and King, and Sacrifice—this Word of God presents himself before the waters. He goes down into the stream, not, like Joshua, to walk dry-shod through its bed—nor like the Jews to seek sanctification—but rather to let the waters encompass him, that by their contact with the hallowed Flesh of the Lamb of God, they might receive sacramental power to take away the sins of the world.

The saintly Baptist places his trembling hand upon the sacred head of the Redeemer, bending it beneath the wave; the Fire is immersed in the water; the Sun of Justice vivifies this his creature, imparting to it the glow of life-giving fruitfulness; and Water thus becomes the source of supernatural life. When Christ descends below the waters, he takes the old Adam with him. Rising out of the water, this New Adam, bearing within himself the whole of

creation, beholds the heavens torn open and the Spirit of God in the form of a Dove.

But the Branch this Dove finds is the Branch of Jesse prophesied by Isaiah, whose tree is the Cross whereon heaven and earth are reunited. The Dove hovers above the head of **JESUS**, overshadowing at one and the same time the Humanity of the Incarnate Word and the water which bathed his sacred Body. And in the midst of this is fulfilled the prophecy of Psalm 29: “The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the voice of the Lord is a glorious voice.” And what says this Voice? “Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Thus, by the presence of the Dove and the Voice of the Father, Christ is revealed as the God-Man who is King over his new creation; the Holy Trinity is unveiled; and the mystery of our redemption is accomplished: the Waters are invested with the power to wash away sin.

As Our Lord comes out of the river and ascends the bank, he raises up with himself the entire universe, regenerated and sanctified, with all its crimes and defilements drowned in the flood of Divine Mercy. Just as by way of the Jordan Joshua led the Hebrews of old into a new land of promise, so too through the Jordan Christ leads all creation to renewal. That primordial element that for so long symbolized chaos, fear, and destruction has now become the means of bestowing a new life and a new identity on mankind. The “restoration of all things” has begun.

“Ye must be born again,” Our Lord tells Nicodemus; and now, by “water and the Spirit,” we will be.

Today we venerate the Baptism of Christ, and may we celebrate this feast honourably. Be cleansed so that you may be like lights in the world, reflecting Our Lord’s love to others. Learn the mystery of your illumination in Christ, and pray to be enlightened by the Trinity more purely and clearly.

Christ is baptized, let us descend with him, that we may also ascend with him. Let us lovingly appreciate the humility of our Saviour, who permits himself to be weighed down by the hand of a mortal man, in order that he might “fulfil all righteousness” to every human person.

Christ is made radiant, let us shine forth with him. And let us thank him for this grace of Baptism, which has opened to us—and to all the world—the gates of paradise.

Christ is baptized, and joy possesses the whole world, for the Serpent’s head is crushed in the Jordan, and now is every creature delivered.

O Thou who dost sanctify the waters, to Thee we all cry out: Have mercy upon us. Amen.

Sources:

The Liturgical Year, Gueranger

On Christ's Baptism, St. Gregory Nazianzus

Office of Mattins, January 13<sup>th</sup>, *The Anglican Office Book & The Anglican Breviary*