

Epiphany II

I take as my text today, the Gospel passage from St. Mark:

And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him: and there came a voice from heaven, saying, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be always acceptable unto thee, O Lord, my Strength and my Redeemer.”

With the Gospel from St. Mark recounting the Baptism of Jesus, we focus on one of the most important and fundamental aspects of Christianity — Baptism.

In the evolution of the Epiphany Season, the earliest observances of the Manifestation of Jesus Christ to the world centered on His Baptism. This emphasis on that moment in the Life of Christ was due in part to early Church concern with Gnosticism.

Baptism served to counter the Gnostic belief that it was only at this point that the Divine Christ first appeared in the world. Gnostics did not believe in the human birth of our Lord, thus, for them, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus as He emerged from the waters of the Jordan marked the point of His Divinity.

This Gnostic concept was declared heresy very early in the Church.

As we look more closely at the Baptism of Jesus at the hands of John the Baptist, we can see in St. Mark's account two significant aspects of the event: first, the awakening of Jesus to the full sense of His vocation and mission; and, second, the model for every disciple's initiation into Christ's Kingdom.

During those years of obscurity preceding His public ministry, we may, as do many theologians, presume that full knowledge of Who He was may have been a hindrance for our Lord.

Certainly, He was aware of His unique character, the difference between Himself and others, as well as His communion with God. He may have been aware of the greatness of His mission. But, there is a general presumption within the Church that He could not have had full self-knowledge of His Divine Nature.

Before His public ministry could begin, however, the veil must be lifted.

Thus, we can see through the outward signs in the testimony of St. Mark, the inward revelation of Christ's Divine Nature as He emerged from His Baptism: the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove and the voice from heaven saying, "Thou art My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Through this witness, we see, at a moment in time, the revelation of the Holy Trinity with the Father's Voice from Heaven proclaiming the divinity of His Son, as the Holy Spirit descends upon Him in the form of the dove.

If we take into consideration the other Gospel accounts of the Baptism of Jesus, we can conclude that the Voice from Heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit were to be heard and seen only by Jesus and John.

In this unveiling of the mysterious nature of Jesus to Himself and to John the Baptist, we see also a decline in John's role and the full emergence of our Lord as the Messiah.

If we read St. Matthew's account, we can further realize the significance of our Lord's Baptism in that it is not a washing away of sins but the anointing of the Servant of Jehovah for his office in accordance with the prophecy of Isaiah 61: 1, "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek."

To quote from J.R. Dummelow's Commentary on the Bible:

To Israel it was 'the showing to the people' of the promised monarch, and His consecration by the unction of the Holy Spirit to the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king.

Thus, we could describe the Baptism of Jesus in one aspect as truly a spiritual experience for our Lord.

A second aspect of the Baptism of Jesus is that of a model for the initiation into Christ's fellowship; it is the type and first example of all true baptism, by this we mean of water and the Spirit.

I am always hesitant to use the word *initiation* in the same breath as Baptism, because to many of our Protestant denominations and sects, Baptism is merely an *initiation*, not a sacrament in the true sense.

As John the Baptist preached baptism as a washing away of the pollution of sin, it also represented to him the incorporation into a new community awaiting the coming of the "Day of the Lord."

In the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John, we see the establishment on earth of the new community in Christ for all who shall be baptized in Him. Then, at Pentecost, we see the Apostles experience the Baptism of the Holy Spirit in its outpouring upon the Church.

So, Baptism, from the very beginning as a sacramental rite, is the basis and cornerstone of the New Life in Christ and, as we hear in the words of St. Peter in the 2nd Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, it is by Baptism that we receive the Holy Spirit.

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

As repentance is a precondition for baptism, so baptism is a precondition for membership in the New Life of Christ. And, without baptism all other sacraments of the Church are invalid.

In its true sense as a sacrament, baptism can be equated to no other concept of initiation, for baptism is more than an initiation: it is a re-birth.

In baptism we die to sin and are buried in Christ only to be reborn into the New Life of Christ.

In the primitive Church, immersion symbolized the new Christian's complete burial as one dying to sin; his emergence from the water as entering the new Christ-Life, being born again as a child of God, a spiritual rebirth.

How wonderful the Gospel message is: no matter that our bodies are perishable, if we have been baptized in the “Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” we become inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven and our reward as faithful Christians is life eternal in union with Him.

There is nothing more basic to Christianity than Baptism. It is by this act that we become Christians in the full sense.

What do we mean by this?

Though there may be individuals who believe that Jesus Christ is both God and Man, that is Christians by the Internal Definition; and though there may be Christians who have been baptised who do not believe that Jesus Christ is both God and Man, but who are Christians by the External Definition; it is only by both the Internal and External Definitions that we are Christians in the full sense.

To be fully a member of the Christian Church, one must be baptised. However, based on early Church teaching, there are two exceptions:

The first is the *Baptism of Blood* and the second is the *Baptism of Desire*.

The *Baptism of Blood* goes back to the early days of the Church, during the periods of persecution. So many converts, desirous of admission into the Church by Baptism were murdered before they could be baptised. This martyrdom or *Baptism of Blood* was considered as taking the place of Baptism.

This concept was extended over time to catecumens who died before they could be baptised. This came to be called the *Baptism of Desire*. In other words, they believed and wanted to be baptised into the Church but circumstances beyond their control prevented it.

These are exceptions. Exceptions in the extreme, for we must remember that foremost, Baptism is a gift of God and is the first stage in the changing of our nature. It is a rebirth and a seal of the covenant between God and man.

By Baptism we are indelibly marked as children of God and made inheritors of His Kingdom — not inheritor as one who possess it at some later time but inheritor as one who possesses it now. This is what we call a mystery of Divine Grace.

When we are initiated into the Church through Baptism, we become members of a society, an organic society into which we are born by Baptism. It is more than a family or a nation because of the element of Divine Mystery.

Indeed, in a treatise on Orthodoxy, Father Sergius Bulgakov wrote:

The Church of Christ is not an institution; she is a new life with Christ and in Christ, directed by the Holy Spirit. The light of the Resurrection of Christ shines on the Church, which is filled with the joy of the Resurrection, of triumph over death. The risen Lord lives with us, and our life in the Church is a life of mystery in Christ.

It is through baptism that we are joined to a life in Christ, dying to sin, spiritually reborn by an act of God upon the human soul.

Baptism is the completion of our belief in Jesus Christ as God and Man by which we are incorporated into the Mystical Body of Christ as He Himself said:

Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.

And as He charged His Apostles:

Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

Today, in commemorating the Baptism of our Lord, we celebrate the fulfillment of John the Baptist's role as the forerunner and we mark the beginning of Christ's work and destiny as the long-awaited Messiah.