

Baptism of the Lord

“You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.” There are slight variations in how Matthew, Mark and Luke recount the story of Our Lord’s baptism. Matthew and Mark describe Jesus seeing the Holy Spirit descending upon him but do not make it clear whether other people saw this. Matthew implies that everyone hears the voice – “This is my Son...my favour rests on him.” Mark and Luke describe the Father speaking directly to Jesus. Luke adds that Our Lord was at prayer when this happened but implies that everyone saw the coming down of the Spirit as a dove as well as hearing the Father’s words.

What matters most is that the baptism of Jesus reveals to his disciples just who Our Lord is. He is not simply a prophet or the longed for Messiah. He is the Son of God. He is united with the Father in a special way through the Holy Spirit. These words are a kind of final confirmation to Our Lord in his human nature of his mission as he sets out on his public ministry. They also reveal to us God as Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Our Lord’s public ministry will conclude with the Ascension when he will send out the disciples to preach the Good News to the ends of the earth and to baptise all people in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus does not need baptism. John’s baptism does not change him. It shows who he already is. Baptism does change us. It makes us what we were not before – one with the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. On the day of our baptism we hear the Father say to us, “You are my beloved son/daughter...my favour rests on you.” It is the most important moment of our lives. We are born again not just as human beings but as members of God’s family.

Baptism is a wonderful gift from God. It is something that parents from a Christian background instinctively seek for their child even if they do not always understand what being a disciple of Christ involves. Sometimes priests set a high threshold demanding evidence of practice before they will baptise a child. In an interview the Pope Benedict XVI stated that he once shared this position seeing the Church of the future as a small group of the committed, but that over time he had changed his views. Pope Francis has taken a similar line. Our Lord was welcoming to all. He challenged but did not set preconditions. Pope Benedict said: “The pedagogy of faith is always a journey and we must accept today's situations. Yet, we must also open them more to each person, so that the result is not only an external memory of things that endures but that their hearts that have truly been touched. The moment when we are convinced the heart is touched -- it has felt a little of Jesus' love, it has felt a little the desire to move along these lines and in this direction, that is the moment when, it seems to me, we can say that we have made a true catechesis. The proper meaning of catechesis, in fact, must be this: to bring the flame of Jesus' love, even if it is a small one, to the hearts of children, and through the children to their parents, thus reopening the places of faith of our time.”

Sometimes parents do not see the importance of baptism or feel that it is a decision the child should take for him or herself although they are happy to take other decisions such vaccination or schooling. This can sadden grandparents who see their grandchildren missing out on God’s gift of grace but they should resist the temptation to do it themselves in secret even though such a baptism would be valid. Instead they should encourage by their prayer and example even when suggestions are ignored or brushed aside. We can be sure that God cares about all children and must trust him to prepare the soil over time.

Still, every Catholic should know how to baptise in an emergency since in danger of death anyone can baptise, even someone who does not share our Faith provided he or she has the right intention. The most basic element is that there must be a washing with water – whether by immersion or pouring or sprinkling – if possible on the head, and that its meaning is spelled out by the words, “I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”. Any water will do – it does not have to be holy water. Should you find yourself in this situation you should inform the local parish priest as soon as possible so that the fact of baptism can be recorded in the register of baptism. Later, when circumstances permit, the child can be brought to Church and the other beautiful ceremonies supplied. What matters most is that our Father says to us, “You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.”