

Baptism of Jesus
Emmanuel Church, Newport, Jan 9, 2011

Today we remember the Baptism of Jesus. It is a day set aside to celebrate and commemorate the Baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan. This day has always been a major feast day in the Orthodox Church, but it has been mostly unheralded in the Episcopal Church till the New Book of Common Prayer. (It is now over quarter of a century old.) . After some 400 years of being hidden the new prayer book with the new lectionary the day has regained prominence and it is celebrated on the first Sunday after the Epiphany.

The Baptism of our Lord is a strange day. The early church, as I suppose today's church, has a great difficulty dealing with it. Why did Jesus the Son of God need to be baptized? Did the sinless Jesus need to be regenerated? Although the Jews practiced Baptism when Gentiles wished to become a Jew, no Jew of birth would ever be baptized as by birth as they were part of the Household of God. Why did Jesus chose to take part in the rite?

In each Gospel we have a slightly different approach and, in fact, in John's Gospel there is question if Jesus was baptized.

One thing we can be sure about is that John the Baptist did baptize Jesus in the Jordan. If the early church could have found any way or reason to claim that John did not baptize Jesus it would have done so.

John had many followers. These followers were a strong challenge to Christianity for several decades if not centuries. One of the sect's beliefs was because Jesus was baptized by John it proved that John was more powerful and the fact that Jesus submitted to be baptized by John showed that John was superior.

In the beginning of the Fourth Gospel makes the strong point about John. "There was a man named John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light"

In Mark's gospel John tells the people someone is coming who is mightier than him. Then it simply states , "In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, Jesus saw the heavens open and the spirit like a dove descending and spoke to

Jesus, “you are my beloved son with you I am well pleased.” The voice and the vision seemingly came to Jesus alone.

In Luke – when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized (no mention of who did the baptizing) and was praying, the heavens opened the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in the bodily form of a dove and a voice from Heaven ,”you are my beloved Son ; with you I am well pleased”.

In the Matthew there is an interplay between John and Jesus.. John hesitates to baptize Jesus saying, “I ought to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” Jesus replies ‘Let it be so now; for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ The John consented. After the baptism comes the Spirit of God alighting on Jesus and the voice from heaven says to all, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”.

In The Gospel of St. John it never states that Jesus was baptized, only that when Jesus appears John points to Him as the one he had told people about , the Messiah.

Regardless of the embarrassment caused to the early church by both the inference that a sinless Jesus took part in a service of repentance and that John was superior there are two things that are true 1) Jesus was baptized by John and 2) it was the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. Luke and Matthew have birth stories but the real ministry of Jesus begins with his baptism.

Given all this confusion what has the Church said about the baptism of Jesus?:-

One theory states that Jesus was renouncing , not a life of sin, but His old life. It is at this point , at the age of 30, that he leaves the carpenter’s shop for the ministry for which He felt called . At His baptism took the first steps that would lead Him to His death upon the cross. He left His home to become homeless. His baptism was not a cleaning from sin but an arming of Himself for the coming conflict. It was the turning point of His life. Maybe we might call it His rite of passage.

A second theory, and one that is reflected in the collect for this Sunday, as well as the Sequence hymn we just sang was that Jesus baptism was His Ordination. He was set apart. The heavens opens, the voice speaks, the spirit comes upon Him. As the collect states,” Father in heaven, who at the Baptism of Jesus in the River

Jordan proclaimed Him your beloved Son and announced Him with the Holy Spirit.

But there may also be a third answer. It is one that is not exclusive of the other two but may speak to you as it has spoken to me. Jesus wanted to equate Himself with humankind. When John the Baptist protests that he should not baptize Jesus, Jesus answers, "Let it be so for now, for it is proper for us (not me or you but us) to fulfill all righteousness". It is though Jesus is saying, "I am one of you. I am not above to look down. I came not to condemn you. I am one of you."

Athanasius, one of the great early theologians put it this way.

He became what we are
That he might make us what he is

In Matthew's gospel Jesus talks about His role in the most beautiful way. He reaches out," Come to me, all who labor and are heaven laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light'. My yoke is easy. Jesus is referring to a training yoke. One animal, the older and experienced ox is yoked with a young ox. The young one does not carry his share of the weight. The yoke is smooth and comfortable. It walks next to the older ox and when it begins to stray from the path the old beast keeps it steady and true. It is in this way the young ox learns how to do what will be expected of it. That's what Jesus offers us; that what Jesus does for us. And the yoke is easy and the burden is light.

In the Old Testament lesson we heard the words "A bruised reed he will not break, and a burning wick he will not quench." Aren't there times when life seems too much? Can't take another step? Can't take in another breath? Like a candle at the end of the evening a feeling comes that it is all over, but the scripture tells us a burning wick He will not quench. Just as in and through our baptism we identify ourselves with God; so in Jesus's baptism He identifies Himself with us.

One of the hymns eliminated from the 1982 hymnal was, "What a friend we have in Jesus".. Musicians disliked it because the music was so syrupy; compilers of the hymnal, a book for corporate worship, thought it was too personal; theologians had difficulty as it was too sentimental, but I am convinced that it carried meaningful message to many of us and possibly the message of Jesus' baptism.

What a friend we have in Jesus, are we weak and heavy laden? Cumbered with a load of care? Jesus knows our every weakness for He has walked this world before us as one of us.

We celebrate the Baptism of Jesus today. It begins the process of knowing who He is as He is manifested to the world, but more than that we know that through our and Jesus' baptism we are His and He is ours. Amen

