



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

The Baptism of Jesus-Year B-Sunday January 10th 2021

Readings: Isaiah 55: 1-11, Psalm Isaiah 12: 2-6, 1 John 5: 1-9,

Mark 1: 7-11

If you want to see a clear New Testament revelation of the reality of the Holy Trinity, St. Augustine tells us, go to the Jordan. There we hear the voice of the Father commending the Son while the Holy Spirit hovers and bears witness.

The event is, of course, the Baptism of Jesus, that remarkable revelatory moment where John, the Baptist, is enlisted to plunge the sinless One into the waters. This is not so that He can be purified or have sin washed away, but rather to sanctify the waters as the initiatory point of salvation and, like Moses, lead His people safe through the waters and onward to the Promised Land.

The history of Baptism is a complex one. The purification rites of the Jews involve submerging in the ritual bath, the Mikvah, to purify themselves for religious practice. The ancient gnostic sect of the Mandaeans employed it as a continual spiritual upgrade in their religious ascent to the Lord of Light.

John takes it and uses it as a central call to the nation to repent of sin, return to God, prepare for the coming of the Messiah.

The symbolism of Baptism is rich in salvific imagery.

As St. John points out, in today's Epistle reading, there are herein three witnesses to what is going on. They are the Spirit, the water, and the blood.

In the Baptism and ministry of Christ is revealed something deeper than a mere human-divine exchange on a riverbank 2000 years ago.

In the descent of the Dove, the sign of the Holy Spirit, we witness the acknowledgement by the Father of the Son. For the Jewish mind – and therefore for ours – this will evoke the memory of the Flood. When the waters of chaos drowned the corrupt world of sinful Man in a catastrophic judgement the sign of the end of the judgement was the Dove returning with the olive sign of peace.

Baptism, therefore, incorporates us into the post-judgement salvation of Christ. We are, in truth, voyagers on the Ark of Salvation – which is the Church.

In the employment of water as the medium of salvation we encounter conflicting imagery. Firstly, the water is a sign of death and destruction – as in the Flood narrative and as in the crossing of the Red Sea. Water destroys the pursuing enemy, cleanses the faithful man from corruption.

But water is also the source of life. Without it we perish. Hence the desert story of the striking of the Rock, by Moses, which releases the saving source of water. In Christian iconography that Rock is Christ.

We are led back even further by the symbolism of water – for it is over the 'waters of chaos' that the Spirit of God broods in the Creation account. The Spirit brings order out of the chaos and effects the creative command of the Word of God, the power that brings all things in to being. The Word later becomes incarnate in the Son, Jesus Christ. After all it is the Holy Spirit that overshadows the Madonna and, with her

loving consent, incarnates the divine power of the universal creator in the humanity of her immaculate womb.

So we see, in baptism, the coming together of massive Scriptural symbolism, the knitting together of the great themes of salvation.

The final witness, St John the Evangelist tells us, is the blood. Spirit, water and blood. The Trinity of signs. That 'blood' witness appears symbolically in the transformed water jars at Cana's famous wedding – the wine of celebration which will fuel the chalices of Christendom at the Mass of the Ages. And its reality is confirmed by St John's witness at the foot of the Cross where, he tells us, when the Centurion's spear confirms the death of Christ, blood and water flow from the side of Christ. We are baptised into His Death that we may also rise with Him in glory. All this rich imagery informs our understanding of Baptism. But it is not simply imagery – the imagery refers to the absolute reality contained in this initiatory Sacrament. The sign is itself.

When we baptise, we are incorporating that initiate into the divine life.

We are, by invocation, infusing him with the Holy Spirit.

We are inviting God to begin the work of new creation out of the chaos of the Fall and the Flood.

We are marking with the blood of the Redeemer, the Cross-delivered soul whose fate, otherwise, would be the common lot of our mortality.

All of that is achieved by our being 'plunged' completely into the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It is a useful spiritual exercise, on this great feast, to go back to the day that most of us cannot remember, our Baptism.

Pray for the church where we received this precious Sacrament.

Pray for our parents and godparents, the priest and all who assembled to launch us into the Faith and onto the road of salvation.

Commit ourselves anew to the service of Christ. Walk with Him, in our hearts, into the waters, submit all to His loving mercy, submerge all into His beautiful cleansing power and thank Him for the sacrifice of His Blood, by which alone we are redeemed and made fit for Heaven and the eternal company of the Blessed and Glorious Trinity.