

Dyed with Christ colour to die with Christ

The Baptism of Our Lord – January 12, 2020

Readings: Isa 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10:34-38; Mt 3:13-17

“The Spirit of God descended like a dove..., a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my son’” (Mt)

Prologue: The commemoration of Jesus’ Baptism ought to remind each of us of our own baptism. Though most of us have been baptized as infants, yet, it is vital to be aware that our first and foundational identity as ‘Christians’ comes from us being ‘baptized’ and ‘anointed’ in Christ. This demands that each of us, Christians, emulates Jesus in all He *is*, He *says*, He *does*.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. In the second part of the Book of Isaiah (from chs 40-55, often called ‘Deutero-Isaiah’), there are four ‘Servant songs’ which have descriptions of a future envoy of God who will have the characteristics of prophet, priest and king, and will be ready to suffer and die for his people. Today’s passage is from the first of these four oracles that mirror the Messiah. God’s servant is God’s Messiah, a chosen one, Spirit-filled, and one in whom “God delights”. In the First Testament, the spirit of God was bestowed upon prophets, priests and kings. Though this servant will be powerful, he will be humble and gentle in accomplishing his God-given mission, which will be to “bring forth justice”. There is also foretelling that this servant will be “a covenant to the people, a light to the nations” (v.6). Scripture scholars see Isaiah’s “I have put my Spirit upon him” (v.1) and Jesus’ baptism in today’s gospel passage with “God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him” (v.16) as parallels. From this they conclude that Matthew ‘dyes’ Jesus, the Messiah, with Isaiah’s ‘Servant colour’ before unfolding his new, covenantal mission.
2. While the first reading describes the ‘suffering servant’ as being invested with the power of God’s Spirit, the gospel reading describes the actual event of the Messiah being baptized and empowered with the Spirit some five centuries later. Note that the baptism which John ministered to those who came to the River Jordan was one for repentance of sins. In other words, all those who lined up at the banks of the Jordan were sinners needing repentance. The external sign of being washed by water was indicative of their inner repentance and spiritual cleansing. By sharp contrast, Jesus was the sinless one who really had no need of any baptism. Nonetheless, by standing in line with sinners, he symbolically shows that he is in solidarity with them. Moreover, as mentioned in Matthew’s gospel, he will be fulfilling what was told to his foster-father, Joseph: “he [Jesus] will save his people from their sins” (1:21). Knowing that his cousin Jesus is the holy, sinless one come from God, John would have prevented him, saying: “I need to be baptized by you; and do you come to me?” (v.14). Jesus’ answer, “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all *righteousness*” (v.15) is indicative of what Paul says of Jesus’ role as reconciler (2 Cor 5:21): “For our sake God made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the *righteousness* of God.”
3. The English ‘baptism’ is derived from the Greek, *baptizo*, meaning, ‘dyeing’ or ‘dipping’. As Jesus “came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him” (v.16). Mention of ‘heavens

opening' is the result of a three-tier worldview of heavens being 'up there', earth being 'around here' and Hades/hell being below us: the 'underworld'. This small detail of 'heavens opened' appears only twice earlier in the Bible, i.e., at Ezekiel's call to his prophetic mission (Ezek 1:1) and announcing the advent of the Messiah (Isa 64:1). The anointing with the Spirit indicates that the time is ripe for Jesus to begin his ministry. In the Bible, the Spirit is given to empower those entrusted with a mission (see Judges 3:10; 6:34; Num 11:25, etc.). Unlike the baptism narratives in Mark and Luke, Matthew's gospel lays greater stress on Jesus' baptism. He comes to the river *in order* to be baptized and insists on being baptized despite John's protestations. By undergoing John's baptism, the Jesus of Matthew's gospel kills two birds with one stone: first, he does what a good Jew was required to do and fulfills the Law by stating that "we should do all that righteousness demands" (v.15), and second, Jesus is shown as integral to, and inaugurator of, the new messianic community by standing with repentant sinners. The voice: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased" (v.17) heard by all is the stamp of divine authorization that differentiates Jesus from the others baptized.

Linking the 2nd Reading to the 'Dyeing' Baptismal Theme: This reading from the 'Acts of the Apostles' contains Peter's speech, wherein he refers to Jesus' baptism and anointing with the Spirit. Interestingly, Peter's speech in today's passage is the outcome of an experience (see Acts ch. 10) he has with a so-called pagan-centurion, Cornelius. Peter has a dream about being asked to eat the flesh of animals whom he, a good Jew, was not supposed to eat. But God tells him to eat; and he hears the voice saying, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (10:15). This 'dream-experience' makes Peter to re-examine his original belief that only Jews can follow the Way of Christ. He baptizes Cornelius. In this passage (vv.34-38), he proclaims: "Jesus Christ is Lord of *all!*" (v.36). Indeed, if Jesus is Lord of *all*, then his Body-Church must strive to save *all* women and men. Our baptism or 'dyeing' is truly 'catholic' – literally meaning 'universal' – precisely because it opens us out to *all* peoples and responds to *all* problems.

Three Texts from Church Tradition:

St Irenaeus (c.130-202) in *'The Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching'*: "Remember that we have received baptism for the remission of sins in the name of God the Father and in the name of Christ, the Son of God, who was incarnate, died and rose again, and in the Holy Spirit of God. This baptism is the seal of eternal life and the new birth unto God that we should no longer be the children of mortal men but of the eternal and perpetual God."

St Cyprian (c. 200–258) in *'Treatise'* 10:14: "Let us, then, who in baptism have both died and been buried in respect of the carnal sins of the old person, who have risen again with Christ in the heavenly regeneration, both think upon and do the things which are Christ's, even as the same apostle again teaches and counsels, saying: "The first man is of the dust of the earth; the second man is from heaven" (*Treatise* 10.14).

Pope Francis (on baptism): "Let the grace of your baptism bear fruit in a path of holiness. Let everything be open to God; turn to God in every situation. Do not be dismayed, for the power of the Holy Spirit enables you to do this, and holiness, in the end, is the fruit of the Holy Spirit in your life."

REFLECTION: Are we striving with help from the Spirit to live a life of holiness, love, service?
