

About a month ago I had a humbling experience. In the December meeting of our St. Joseph's Men's group, we were discussing the Gospel for the second Sunday of Advent. It was from the beginning of the Gospel of Mark, the verses just preceding today's Gospel. That reading introduced us to John the Baptist and the baptisms he was performing in the Jordan river. During our discussion the question was asked, "what is the difference between John's baptism and Christian baptism?". I gave the quick answer that Christian baptism forgives sins and John's was just an expression repentance. It was then pointed out to me, much to my chagrin, that Mark said John's baptism was "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". I did some quick arm waving to avoid this difficult revelation and we moved on. Since then it has bothered me that I didn't really have the answer to the question. As it turns out, God has given me a second chance to answer this question since my turn to preach has come on the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord. So I have a chance to redeem myself today.

So what is the difference between John's Baptism and Christian Baptism and why did Jesus need to be baptized anyway?

To answer these questions it helps to understand a little about Jewish purity rituals. Jewish Law described many occasions when a Jew would be required to undergo a ritual washing. Ritual washing was done to purify a person for anything, from simply touching something unclean to preparing for the atonement of

one's sins. These take on a couple of forms, simple washing of the hands to washing the entire body by immersion, called a *mikvah*. The one we are interested in today is the *mikvah* bath. This is a ritual cleansing that a pious Jew is required to do before entering the Temple for sacrifice. In certain circumstances, it required “*living water*”, that is, water that is flowing, like from a spring, or in John's case, the Jordan river. A *mikvah* was required by the law for a priest before he entered the Temple to offer sacrifice. John's baptism was a sort of *mikvah*. He was freeing people from their sins in order to prepare them for a new temple, a new sacrifice, and a new priesthood in Jesus. He was *preparing the way of the Lord*.

Jesus' baptism wasn't intended to wash away his sins, for he had none, but may have been the beginning of the preparation for his own sacrifice. He is not only the sacrificial victim but also the priest offering the sacrifice. I suggest that this *mikvah* would have fulfilled the requirements of the law for this new High Priest before he entered the Temple to offer the sacrifice of himself. Jesus' *mikvah* was a foreshadowing of what he was going to do at the climax of his ministry on earth.

The occasion of Jesus' baptism accomplished several other things. In submitting himself to John's baptism, Jesus confirms John's ministry and testifies that John was indeed sent by God to prepare the way for him. He was “*the voice of one crying out in the desert, “Make straight the way of the Lord,”*” as foretold by the prophet Isaiah. This day was the climax of John's ministry.

Jesus' baptism was also a second epiphany, a manifestation of who Jesus was when the Jews heard the voice from heaven say, *"You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."* It is a theophany, a physical manifestation of all three persons of the Triune God, the Father in the voice from heaven, the Son in Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the descending dove. In the Gospel of John, the Baptist says *"Behold, the Lamb of God"*. He knew who Jesus was, we know who Jesus is, but the average Jew at that time did not. They were just beginning to learn who Jesus was. Through John's baptism the Jews are being introduced to their Messiah.

Submitting to John's baptism is an act of humility, in his divine nature Jesus participates in this very human act. Father Robert Barron puts it like this: *"Jesus stood shoulder to shoulder with sinners in the muddy waters of the Jordan, not because he was a sinner in need of salvation, but because he wanted to bring the divine love even to the darkest and most painful corners of human experience."* God not only condescended to become human, but now he associates himself with acknowledged sinners. This is the hallmark of Jesus' ministry.

Lastly, Jesus prepares us for the Sacrament of Baptism. In submitting himself to John's baptism of water, Jesus prepares the waters for the Sacrament of Baptism. The water does not purify Jesus, but Jesus purifies the waters. He sanctifies the baptism ceremony, making it more than just a ritual washing. Jesus institutes the Sacrament of Baptism after his resurrection when he

commands us to baptize all nations, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

But Jesus was not the only one being baptized that day in the Jordan river. What did John's baptism mean for the other people? John said his baptism was for the remission of sins. Indeed that is just what a *mikvah* was intended to do, to cleanse the person of his sins before his act of worship. Is this not what Christian baptism intends? Not exactly. Christian baptism is not just a ritual washing to cleanse one of his sins. Christian baptism does much more. The baptism that Jesus instituted does take away any sins we have committed but it also takes away Original sin. But it is not the water that forgives sins but God who forgives. It was Jesus' act of self sacrifice that paid the price for mankind's disobedience since the time of Adam and Eve. Baptism in Christ makes us recipients of the benefits of his sacrifice, it grafts us into the Body of Christ and makes us co-heirs with Christ. Baptism in Christ also bestows on us graces from God which we have access to for the rest of our lives. Baptism in Christ also puts on our souls an indelible mark that shows we belong to Christ. It can never be erased. Baptism in Christ is much more, much richer than John's baptism.

I cannot overstate the importance of Christian baptism. It is not just a ritual washing. It is not an initiation either. It actually changes us. Through it we become part of the Kingdom of God. It also carries with it responsibility. We are commissioned to be

Priest, Prophet and King; Priest to offer worship to God, Prophet to proclaim the Good News to the world and King to rule over God's creation, which he has entrusted to us – to use, protect and cherish.

Your baptism is the most important day of your eternal life. Do you know the date? Mine is July 5, (Yes, I had to look it up). We celebrate our birthdays, we should also celebrate our baptism day, our re-birthday. If you don't know the date of your baptism, look it up, and do something special to celebrate on that day each year.