

Baptism of Jesus

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Today we come to the final celebration of the Christmas season and it's kind of nice to have the snow reminding us of what we like to think of as Christmas in NE. And it's the perfect kind of snow. Light, fluffy, the kind that doesn't keep people from going to Church on a Sunday!

Now you may be wondering why the church celebrates the feast of the baptism in the Christmas season. Isn't Christmas about the child Jesus, the newborn? Isn't that what we sing about in the Christmas season? Isn't that what all the stories of Christmas are about? We call them the infancy narratives. And here we are with a gospel passage all about the grown-up Jesus and we still say it's Christmas.

What's going on? Really the Christmas season is more about the revelation of the identity of Jesus than it is about the birth of a child. The question that pervades all of the Gospels is "Who is this?" not only—What child is this? In Mark's gospel, which we hear today and will hear throughout this liturgical cycle, the identity of Jesus is one of the primary themes. Although Mark's gospel begins with the words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," revealing the identity of Jesus to those who will hear the good news, he doesn't go into detail. He doesn't have any stories of the early years of Jesus as Matthew and Luke do. He begins the "good news" with the narrative of the baptism. And in fact, throughout the Gospel there is this tension between those who know the true identity of Jesus and those from whom it is hidden. The demons know that Jesus is the Son of God but the true identity of Jesus is not revealed to the disciples. But I am "fast forwarding" into the Gospel stories of the ministry of Jesus which we will hear later on.

In the Christmas season we, like the shepherds and the magi, are witnesses to the true identity of Jesus. He is revealed to the shepherds by the angels as "the savior, Christ the lord," God's holy and anointed one. The Christ, the messiah. To the magi, he is revealed by the star as the newborn king. And in his baptism by John in the Jordan he is revealed as God's beloved son. (What is interesting in Mark's gospel is that this revelation seems to be to Jesus personally.) It is only later in the Transfiguration that there are witnesses to the heavenly voice affirming Jesus' identity as the "beloved."

So Christmas is all about answering the question, “Who is this Jesus of Nazareth?” Where did he come from? And of course, Who is he “for us”? It’s this scene today that gives us a glimpse of who he is “for us”. The context of the revelation is his baptism by John in the Jordan.

On this feast of the Baptism of Jesus, we had hoped to be able to bless our new baptismal font which will be at the entrance to the church. The original baptistery will become the Eucharistic chapel of reservation. The new baptismal font with flowing water will be at the entrance of the church and hopefully remind us of our baptism, our share in the life of Christ every time we enter. Unlike the little fonts at the entrance, this font will be the primary symbol of baptism.

Yesterday, here at St Ignatius we spent a good part of the day in a gathering of many of the parish leaders, Pastoral Council, commission people and parish staff. We gathered to finish some strategic planning for the future of the parish. But we began with a reflection on our experience of baptism.

What we reflected on was that as Catholics most of whom were baptized as infants; the sacrament doesn’t have as much meaning as Eucharist, confirmation, reconciliation. Baptism is something that happened TO us. Not something that made a great difference. Some of us are envious of people who chose to be baptized as adults since the power of the sacrament was able to be felt and known. And yet everything in our Christian life is meant to flow from the waters of baptism. It is our second birth. Just as we receive our identity in life from our natural birth, a child of a mother and father whose genetic traits we inherit as well as the whole family into which we are born, it’s through baptism that we receive our true identity as sons and daughters of God.

We know that the Christmas season is all about “gift”, the gift of God “with us”, the gifts we exchange at this time of the year. But the greatest gift we have is our share in the life of Christ that comes through our Baptism. There is nothing more valuable, nothing more precious. It is in our baptism that we come to know who we are and hear the voice of God say to each of us “You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter in whom I take delight.”