

## **Baptism of the Lord**

One of the big questions of life today seems to be the question of identity. It seems harder and harder to find ways by which we can identify ourselves. We seem to get caught between putting “tags” on people or putting them into boxes, and on the other hand we seem to sometimes over-emphasize individualism and uniqueness. Yet coming to a healthy respect of who we are, what we hold in common with others because of family, culture or preference and what is unique and identifying is a necessary, if difficult, process.

In our reading of St Luke’s Gospel, today we begin with the moment when Christ is identified for us. He is identified by three witnesses, each of whom gives us a very different but very important understanding of who Christ is—the Prophet, the water and the Spirit.

The Prophet identifies Jesus, and in doing so he identifies himself in relation to him. John the Baptist is a man who has an impact, who gives a sense of authenticity and a sense of depth, and yet he says that what he does is merely a poor imitation of what the greater one will do. John, so important and so authentic, says he will not even do a servant’s work for him. He is the greater, the most powerful and the most certain means by which God will visit his people. He will baptize with fire.

St Catherine of Siena is remembered for saying “Become who God wants you to be and you will set the world on fire”. This is the first aspect of our meditation on our identity in Christ. Christ set the world on fire. Yet that might not be so obvious to his contemporaries. Setting the world on fire in this way is not a nuclear holocaust or a towering inferno. Christ sets the world on fire with the real, sustaining and transforming power of his presence. We do the same thing. Through great and small acts, from making life commitments to making cups of tea, from dramatic gestures to simple acts of kindness, we set the world on fire with the powerful and transforming reality of Christ’s presence. Think about it—you have, in your own way, set the world around you on fire. You have done it in looking after your families and loved ones, in participating in this community, in sharing your time and your talents. Continue to be what God is calling you to be but above all, for a moment today, recognize the value of what you do—for you are setting the world on fire!

The water gives witnesses to Christ. Christ begins his public ministry by lining up in this queue of people who wanted baptism—this penitential exercise that might allow them to somehow begin again. The Jordan looks a very “mild” river in comparison to the Seine or the Rhine or even the Barrow! Yet submerging oneself in that water for the people of Christ’s time, at the hands of a prophet and a holy man was a very symbolic exercise. It had echoes of that moment when Joshua, the leader and the guide, led God’s People across the Jordan to take possession of their land, God’s land. In a very real way, that was the defining moment for this people. To really belong, you had to trace your ancestry back to that moment of crossing the river. In that moment, God’s people took control of his land. All was as it should be and God was with his people. Yet people do make a mess of everything and if you had lost that sense of being part of that tradition, if you felt you had betrayed and belied that heritage, then what could you do? John at the banks, he invited people to come back into that water again and to pass through into

that land anew—with new hope with a renewed sense of belonging and a renewed sense of sharing in that heritage.

Yet when Christ stands in those flowing waters, it is different. This time it is a new Joshua who wants to lead a new people—all humanity—into that relationship with God, into that sense of belonging to God's people, living in God's land. As Joshua's troops, dripping with water and taking their first steps into their promised land were to be a sign of God's presence in the earth, now Christ, dripping with the same water and praying on the banks of the river was to be the **reality**, not simply the sign, of God being with all people, of God visiting humanity. In that action, Christ brought all humanity across the river from the wanderings and the wonderings of humanity to being the people of God, to belonging to God and standing on his holy ground wherever we are.

The third witness is the Spirit. The spirit tears opens the Heavens and descends in that moment and the voice says—here is the one in whom I am well pleased. Fathers are well pleased in their children, from the smallest to the greatest details. From the first smile to the etched drawings to the moment they graduate to the very last detail, parents take delight in their children and have a limitless love for them. So it is, says the Spirit. God takes delight in his Son's presence in the world. So it is for us—remember those words. Lots of things will attack your dignity, from your own weaknesses and mistakes to malice and dislike from others, but remember those words. We belong to Christ. We are one with Christ. We are Christ's presence in the world and the Father takes delight in us!!

Set the world on fire by being who you are!

Cross the river Jordan and be part of the People of God standing on Holy Ground wherever you are!

Remember those words of the Spirit—The Father is well pleased with you, his love is on you!

These are the ways by which Christ is identified in the Gospel as he begins his ministry. At the beginning of 2013, let them what identifies you to yourself and discretely but powerfully, to the world around you!!

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