

Homily for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord

January 11-12, 2020

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

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If you were to visit Israel today, especially with a tour group that arranges visits to sites meaningful to Christians, you yourself could be baptized in the Jordan River. While scholars believe that Jesus was baptized by his cousin John at a point on the river not far from the Dead Sea, today at a site called Yardenit, a facility has been set up to welcome both visitors who wish to be baptized in the river (and bring along their own clergy) and groups of Christians renewing their baptismal vows as an act of devotion.

At Yardenit you buy an admission ticket that includes a towel and access to the showers afterward, because, unfortunately, the waters of the Jordan are less than pristine. You might be offered a choice: to go partway down the steps to the river and just touch the water with your feet, or go all the way in with your group leader, where each participant in turn is submerged into the Jordan. While some of your own group may be gasping and blubbing from water dripping everywhere and the difficulty of wading back to shore, another group not far away is shrieking in joy because they were baptized just as Jesus was. It can be a powerful, memorable religious experience.

It's important for Christians to be aware that John was not the only Baptist on the circuit of preachers denouncing sin and calling for repentance. In fact there were a number of such wandering preachers, spiritual descendants of the great prophets who, several hundred years before, had called upon the entire Hebrew people to renounce the foreign gods and cults they had adopted while in exile, to remember the God who had brought them out of slavery in Egypt, and to change their ways as an entire people to worship the God of their ancestors.

The new generation of prophets such as John the Baptist did not direct their efforts to an entire people, but to individuals in their own concrete circumstances, such as soldiers and merchants. As a sign of the individual's determination to turn away from their former evil state of life and to begin an

entirely new life, the prophet invited them to go down into the water. By immersing themselves they showed their willingness to plunge into a radically new way of life, cleansing themselves symbolically of their wickedness, and emerging as new persons, strong and ready to embrace a way of life characterized by honesty and justice.

In our day we tend to think of Baptism as “the baby sacrament,” an event that serves the purpose of solemnly giving the child her or his name, and gathering family and friends around to affirm their willingness to support the new parents in raising their child as a person of faith. But when the Rite for the Christian Initiation of Adults, or R.C.I.A., was restored, whole parishes were invited to accompany adult catechumens in their journey of spiritual growth and catechetical learning, right up to the powerful life-changing moment of their Baptism at the Easter Vigil, and its culmination in the Eucharist.

Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan River was not a sacrament. Sacraments are rooted in the death and resurrection of Christ – the Paschal Mystery. In the sacraments the living Christ acts through simple substances—water, oil, bread, wine—and simple actions such as human touch, and words that come down to us from our ancestors in faith. For the same reason the Last Supper was not a sacrament (because Christ had not yet died and rose from the dead), although the Eucharist is.

No one and nothing can negate our baptism. We are baptized only once —that’s the reason why, if you are a baptized Christian who goes down into the Jordan River as a devotional act, it’s not a second baptism, but a renewal of one’s commitment to the first.

It is precisely in the dignity of our baptism that we can live in some way in union with Christ, and can reflect the love and compassion of Christ to others, the best we can. As Paul says in the letter to the Romans, we have died and risen with Christ in Baptism, the source of our own unshakable hope of resurrection. This knowledge gives us a profound faith, great strength, and unshakeable conviction to do the work of making justice and challenging unjust structures.