

St. Paul's Sunday January 13, 2008

The Baptism of Our Lord

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Martin Luther, on January 6th 1534,¹ said that “The most important thing about today is that Christ was baptized.” In Luther’s time the Feast of Epiphany included the Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, they were not separate feast days. Baptism in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one of the two central sacraments of our Church. It is through baptism that our sins are forgiven and that we are received into the household of God, within which we confess the faith of Christ Crucified, proclaim his resurrection and share in his eternal priesthood.² It is through baptism that we receive the Light of Christ to show that we have passed from darkness to light and which we are to shine before others through our good works. If we confess such a faith in Christ why then would it have been necessary for Christ himself to be baptized? John the Baptist is equally perplexed and says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Mat 3:14). John was perplexed because he was baptizing for the repentance of sins. He was an Israelite prophet who saw the iniquities of his time and called people to a baptism through which they could repent of their sins. It’s clear that John must have known Jesus and known that Jesus was not a sinful man, I need to be baptized by you!! I have more sin than you who have none, is what John is saying. But Jesus answers “Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness” (Mat 3:15). What does that mean? Well, righteousness

¹ Luther, M. “This is My Son, the Beloved”: Sermon on the Baptism of Jesus. The Epiphany of Our Lord (January 6, 1534.) F. J. Gaiser *Tr. Word and World Vol. XVI, No.1, 1996.*

² Book of Alternative Services p. 161.

here means behaviour in accordance to God's will as revealed in Scripture. Jesus tells John that he must be baptized because this is the will of God. Well that answers the question to some extent but the real revelations to us begin when John actually baptizes Jesus.

“Just as he 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. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased” (Mat 3:16-17). Here then is the revelation. It is not that Jesus needed to be baptized by John for the repentance of his sins but because through this baptism God's will is revealed. Martin Luther puts it beautifully. “The heavens, previously closed, are now opened, becoming a clear gateway and window for us to see into heaven itself.”³ Through this baptism God reveals the true nature of Christ as the chosen one of God. Matthew reveals that in this action, this baptism, we see the fulfillment of Scripture we see the fulfillment of Isaiah's words “Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (Isaiah 42:1).

It's important for us to understand that Matthew was writing before people had developed an understanding of Christ as the incarnate Word of God, which John writes about some decades later. To Matthew Christ was the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies which said that a saviour would be borne out of the line of David. To Matthew, Christ was already Messiah before his

³ Luther, M. “This is My Son, the Beloved”: Sermon on the Baptism of Jesus. The Epiphany of Our Lord (January 6, 1534.) F. J. Gaiser *Tr. Word and World Vol. XVI, No.1, 1996.*

baptism but that here, “he receives divine empowerment through the visible conferral of the Holy Spirit.”⁴

We as modern Christians, with the benefit of the whole canon of Scripture, have come to the understanding that through this baptism Christ was revealed as the incarnate Word of God, the Word made flesh, the second person of the Holy Trinity. That through this baptism, the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were revealed to humanity in an instant in time. Martin Luther says “There is no longer a dividing line between God and us, for he has descended into the [baptismal] water. Isn’t this a great revelation? That is why we call [this festival] Epiphany, because God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—has revealed himself with all his angels.”⁵ This is a staggering revelation isn’t it? The reason for Jesus baptism is not that he needs to repent of his sins but that it was the will of God to reveal Godself through this particular action.

Why then, why at a place and time when sinful humanity came to confess their sins? Why not with great pomp and circumstance and power. Why not just wipe out all the sin and the sinners and start again? Because “He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.” God chooses not to come in power to change the world by breaking those bruised reeds and snuffing out those dim wicks. God loves the world even in all its brokenness and sinfulness, God will not break the bruised reed, God will not quench the dimly burning wick because God

⁴ Hare, D.R.A. *Matthew-Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1993): 21-22.

⁵ Luther, M. “This is My Son, the Beloved”: Sermon on the Baptism of Jesus. The Epiphany of Our Lord (January 6, 1534.) F. J. Gaiser *Tr. Word and World Vol. XVI, No.1, 1996*.

sees and loves the good in that bruised reed and in that dimly burning wick. So God chooses instead to come and be with this sinful humanity. God chooses to reveal Godself as our brother Christ in the midst of our sinfulness and our brokenness. That's why Jesus needed to be baptized, so that we could see God's presence with us even as we come to confess our own sinfulness, our own brokenness. "The heavens, previously closed, are now opened, becoming a clear gateway and window for us to see into heaven itself," says Martin Luther, and what do we see coming from heaven, not a great conquering hero or an army of angels who with flaming swords come to set the world aright, but a dove, a small and fragile creature of peace, and what do we hear in the voice coming from heaven, not the thundering voice of command and condemnation but the voice of a loving parent, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus was not baptized for the repentance of his sins, he was baptized for us. He was baptized to transform baptism, to make baptism new. To reveal to us, the bruised reeds and dimly lit wicks of the world, that through this new baptism not only will God remember our sins no more but that Godself came to earth as Immanuel, God with us, to invite each and everyone of us personally into God's household. St. Ambrose says that through baptism we are invited to become "fish", that is to immerse ourselves entirely in the waters of a new creation, to enter into a new and creative life, a life where God upholds and sustains us in all that we do. Ambrose like St. Paul says that in this new baptism we share in Christ's resurrection, by entering into the waters of baptism we die to our old lives of sin and brokenness and are resurrected into the new life in Christ. Through it the bruised reeds grow whole again and the dimly burning wicks shine

forth the light of Christ. So the most important thing about today is indeed that Christ was baptized, he was baptized for us so that we might be baptized in him.