The Summit Online Exploring the Word

The Baptism of the Lord, Year A

GOSPEL

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Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. John tried to dissuade him. 'It is I who need baptism from you' he said 'and yet you come to me!' But Jesus replied, 'Leave it like this for the time being; it is fitting that we should, in this way, do all that righteousness demands.' At this, John gave in to him.

As soon as Jesus was baptised he came up from the water, and suddenly the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. And a voice spoke from heaven, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on him.'

(Matthew 3:13-17)

DID YOU KNOW?

Points of interest and Catholic lore

- The Jordan River runs the length of Israel, from north of the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea in the south, and is the lifeblood of the land.
- The exact site of the baptism of Jesus by John is unknown, but the traditional site is at Al-Maghtas, about 10.5 kilometres north of the point where the river enters the Dead Sea.
- The word *baptism* comes from a Greek word meaning 'to plunge'.
- The first Christians were baptised by being plunged into running streams or rivers, following the practice of John.
 Later, large fonts were built in churches, and baptism of the faithful, usually adults, was by full immersion.

EXPLORING THE WORD

This text introduces Jesus in the first public moment of his adult life. It is significant that the public mission of Jesus begins with his baptism. He has made decisions about his future action, which begins with a long and arduous journey spanning the length of Israel from Galilee to the deep south. This is not a random act. Jesus makes that journey with a single purpose: 'to be baptised by John'. In light of Matthew's presentation of Jesus as the fulfillment and perfection of all that is good in Israel, the conversation between these two figures is fascinating. The Baptist recognises Jesus' greater role in God's plan. He has played the part of the Old Testament prophet in preparing the way. Now that the main player has appeared on the stage, is it not fitting that the Baptist bows out of the action? But Jesus is aware of a bigger picture and insists that things remain as they are 'for the time being' so that the demands of righteousness can be satisfied. Both Jesus and John show an openness to accept God's plan, and in reward, God himself enters the story with words of affirmation and love for the Chosen One. Heaven and earth have met in the person of Jesus.

- Jesus' mission grew out of a profound sense of being loved and chosen by God. You too have been chosen.
 What might your mission be?
- Look at the first reading from Isaiah. What insight does this provide in understanding your mission?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

Opportunities for group discussion and personal prayer

- How strong is your own sense of being loved and favoured by God?
- What feelings are you experiencing as your own baptism or reception approaches?
- Have you ever had an experience of being chosen, singled out for a special role or particular responsibility?
 How did you feel? Were you able to carry out the task?
 What challenges did you face? Share your recollections with others.
- Encourage catechumens, along with their sponsors, to visit the baptismal font in the church at some point this week. It may be a good opportunity to chat informally about how the journey is progressing.
- Spend some time each day in quiet contemplation of what the 'voice from heaven' is saying to you and what you must do to be pleasing to God.
- Use these lines from today's collect often this week:

Almighty ever-living God who, when Christ had been baptised in the River Jordan and as the Holy Spirit descended upon him, solemnly declared him your beloved Son, grant that your children by adoption, reborn of water and the Holy Spirit, may always be pleasing to you.



SHARING THE TRADITION

A closer look at the Scripture of the day, to see how it makes more explicit God's word to us through the teachings of Jesus Christ

The baptism of Jesus brings to mind the baptism that all Christians undergo. Baptism is the first of the seven sacraments of the Church. A sacrament is a visible sign of a hidden reality (*CCC*, §774).

 Explore what that means. What hidden reality does baptism call to mind?

A sacrament is a sign through which God communicates love, life and forgiveness to us. 'Immersion in water symbolises not only death and purification, but also regeneration and renewal. Thus the two principal effects (of baptism) are purification from sins and new birth in the Holy Spirit' (CCC, §1262).

- Explore together the meaning of these two aspects of baptism.
- Examine the Rite of Baptism for Infants with special emphasis on the prayers and anointing that form part of the rite. How are forgiveness of sin and new birth reflected in the rite?

SYMBOLS AND IMAGES

Like Jesus, every Christian enters the waters of baptism, or have them poured over them. The symbolism, especially apparent in the practice of full immersion, is that of the tomb. The person enters into the depths and darkness of the tomb and rises to a new life in Christ, symbolised by the white garment worn at baptism. This symbolism also recalls our physical birth from the waters of the womb. In baptism, we are reborn into the life of faith.

LIVING THE WORD

Practical ideas for group leaders to employ in connecting Scripture and daily life, with suggestions for music and environment

- If it is possible, invite the catechumens to attend an infant baptism in your community.
- Gathering at the baptismal font in the church could be a suitable focus, or use a large earthen bowl filled with water. You could speak of the symbolism of water. Today would be a suitable occasion to use a rite of anointing (*RCIA*, §§98–102). You could sing 'Come to the water' (*GA* 403) or 'God has chosen me' (*GA* 497). Conclude with the blessing in the *RCIA* at §97B.

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