

Epiphany 1, Year C
Luke 3:15-17, 21-22
January 10, 2010

The story of the baptism of Jesus illustrates the great need to understand events in their proper context, rather than to imagine that things must have meant then what they mean now. Very shortly after the church became established baptism as a rite of initiation came to be understood as involving forgiveness of sins. There was then no doctrine of "Original Sin;" that would not be developed for another three centuries, but the water of baptism was nevertheless seen as a metaphor of the washing away, the cleansing of the person of those aspects of life and personality that got in the way of life with God.

At the same time there was within the early Church the growing conviction that Jesus even in his humanity, must have been sinless, must have had no impediments to his life with God and must have been perfectly obedient in all ways at all times. These two developments created something of a theological problem for early Christians faced with the undoubted fact that Jesus was indeed baptized, and most certainly was baptized by John the Baptist. The question, or problem might be a better way to put it, was how to explain Jesus undergoing a baptism for the forgiveness of sins if in fact he was, in every meaningful way, sinless. And we see the growing discomfort with this question, or problem, in the Gospels themselves. Mark presents it unapologetically, and in some detail. Matthew adds a speech in which John the Baptist attempts to get

out of this duty by saying that he is unworthy to baptize Jesus, but Jesus assures him that it is “fitting to fulfill all righteousness” whatever that means. Luke, whom we read today, sneaks the baptism in with a relative clause, hoping perhaps that no one will notice, and John, the most ingenious, sets up the entire scene, and then omits the baptism altogether.

Nearly two thousand years later the baptism of Jesus causes a lot less anxiety than it did at the end of the first century of the Christian era, and well it should. Nevertheless I think it instructive to go back and reset the context of that baptism, not simply so our minds can be set at ease about what appears to be conflicting doctrines of the church, but so that we might understand what that baptism probably meant then, and therefore see how it does yet affect us today.

When Jesus was baptized there was in place a fully functioning and quite elaborate system for the forgiveness of sins. It was the Temple, and there it stood in Jerusalem as the center of the life and religion of the Jews. Then as now when people wronged each other reconciliation could be achieved by going directly to those involved and seeking forgiveness. But when you sinned against God, when the whole process of living got in the way of life with God, people went to the temple and offered the sacrifices prescribed in the bible. Theologically what this meant is that while forgiveness from each other was at least potentially free and universally accessible, forgiveness from God was brokered through the priesthood, and localized in the Temple.

That is the context in which Jesus went to John for baptism in the river Jordan. What that context means is that this baptism is not an embarrassment to be explained away, but a frontal assault on the theology of brokered grace dispensed from a single locale. By assenting to a baptism of forgiveness in the Jordan, which was after all the rural eastern frontier of the country, removed from the centers of power, Jesus said “yes” to the notion that forgiveness from God is available to everyone everywhere at any time, and by implication he said “no” to the notion that such forgiveness is brokered by priests and restricted for its dispensation to Jerusalem.

It is impossible to say whether or not Jesus was literally attacking in symbolic fashion the whole sacrificial structure of his own religion or whether he was simply ignoring it. But either way he was declaring that life with God is bigger than any rules, regulations, and rituals; it cannot be controlled by experts no matter how well trained and therefore is accessible to all no matter where you are or who you are. And this, rather than the question of what that baptism says about the ostensible sinlessness of Jesus, is what makes his baptism so important to us.

For we too live in a system in which it can indeed appear that grace is brokered by priests, and restricted in its administration to certain locales. If we want to be consistent with the image we have in the baptism of Jesus, understood in its context, then it seems to me that we need to be very careful about what we think we are doing when we baptize people, and particularly with regard to

what we think we are establishing with respect to a relationship with God. For if we imagine that Christian baptism is absolutely necessary to life with God, and that without it no one can be saved, no one can have true forgiveness, no one can come into a genuine life with God, then in the name of Jesus we are perpetuating a system that he either ignored or attacked, but in any case disagreed with. That would seem to me to be a rather sad irony.

But if what we say in baptism is that we are initiating a person into that religion which declares that although the grace and love and forgiveness of God is necessarily and inevitably realized and glimpsed in particular settings through particular rituals, the larger reality is that this grace is beyond all particular places, above all particular settings, and therefore available to all people, everywhere, at all times. If, in other words, we declare that being a Christian brings us into a faith which proclaims that God is above all religion, and means to redeem all creation, then I say there is nothing wrong with our religious imagination, and our rituals and symbols point to something that is true. But if we declare that being a Christian, and only being a Christian, is what makes you saved, then our rituals are empty of value, and point us not at the one God above all sects and religions, but rather point back at ourselves, and our own certainties. What we say not just *in* the baptismal ritual of the Church, but *about* the baptismal ritual of the Church is crucial. For if Christianity points only to itself in the assurance that we alone are the elect, then we are in effect

worshipping a localized deity, among other localized deities, whose primary purpose is to vindicate our claims against all other localized deities.

Frankly, this world is full of that, and we don't need any more of it. We don't need religious images and proclamations that assure us God cares only about particular cultures and religions whose expressions accord with defined rituals supervised by appropriate professionals. We know where that leads, for we experience it every day and it has made this a weary and fearful world, uncertain not simply of the future, but whether there will even be a future.

We do need, this world I dare say desperately needs, that united voice which says the meaning of our rituals, our proclamations, our preaching our prayers our confessions, our forgiveness, our baptisms is found only when we declare that all this points beyond our religion itself in all its localized, particular expressions to the God beyond all gods, beyond even being itself, who is encountered in the end only when language finally exhausts itself, and the human imagination reaches its very limits in the awe and wonder of the human being who gives up on assurances and certainties and surrenders entirely to trust in that unnamable presence that issues forth in love.

At its best our baptismal covenant points us in that direction, and declares that the value of being a Christian is not that we enjoy a private relationship with a localized god, but that we get to be part of that company which declares that God is beyond all private relationships, and all localized gods. The life, forgiveness and love of God is available to all. Becoming a Christian through

baptism is thus a wonderful privilege and a weighty responsibility. It is a wonderful privilege because it brings us into relationship not just with God, but with the whole world. It is a weighty responsibility because it then becomes incumbent upon us to resist sectarian pressures that are so attractive to people for the sake of proclaiming that Life which encompasses all life, and that Love which transcends all love.