

The Baptism of the Lord
(Isaiah 42:1-4.6-7 / Matthew 3:13-17)
08.01.2017

This Sunday sees the Christmas season draw to a close with the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord. What we celebrate today is Christ's second Epiphany when He is immersed in the waters of the River Jordan. Here Jesus is manifested to Himself and before others as the Son of God. Christ's full identification with sinful humanity is borne witness to at this moment. Here the one called *Emmanuel* in Matthew's gospel, *God-with-us*, He, whom St Paul calls, *the sinless one*, dares to stand in solidarity with all those who come to John for a *baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. In the person of Jesus, our God who is made manifest is shown to be, as the epistle to the Hebrews puts it, *One who is compassionate with us in our weakness*. The identification of Jesus with sinful humanity at the moment of His baptism is not just a one-off gesture. Identification with sinful humanity will prove to be a hallmark of the whole of Jesus' years of ministry. As we read our way through the gospels and assist at the unfolding of the Christ story we will hear the complaint made more than once that the Son of Man associates with people of dubious character and openly enjoys table fellowship with some of society's most notable sinners. The climax of Jesus' association with sinners will come on Calvary's Hill. At Golgotha Christ reveals Himself to be in total solidarity with sinful humanity. There, as Jesus hangs on the cross between two condemned criminals, He is indistinguishable from these guilty men; He appears one with them in their humiliation and their shame. Paul tells us in his Second Letter to the Corinthians that such is Jesus' loving solidarity with us that *for our sakes He made Himself sin* (2 Corinthians 5:21). Writing to the Christians of Corinth Paul pleads with them to receive the love God offers to them and to be reconciled to God. Let me quote the Apostle's own words for you: *For God took the sinless Christ and poured into Him our sins so that in exchange God's goodness might be poured into us*.

If the whole of our Christmas liturgy has revealed what the Fathers of the Church call the *admirabile commercium* (the *admirable exchange*, between God and man), in Jesus' paschal mystery we see this exchange brought to its most admirable limit! What the Apostle Paul's teaching makes clear for us is that just as Jesus identified Himself with us in the mystery of His incarnation so we are called to identify ourselves with Him as we enter into the paschal mystery through our Christian baptism. It is surely worth noting that in the original Christian liturgies of baptism in the early Church, once the newly baptised had been immersed in the waters of baptism and anointed with Holy Oil, these neophytes were introduced into the Christian assembly and hailed with the greeting: *You are Christ!*

We are called to become Christ! We are Christ! We are called with Jesus to see ourselves as God's beloved children; His sons and daughters, in whom He delights.

I want to underline this morning that each one of us is *God's beloved* in whom He delights! As God's beloved children we are called to live together in harmony – as members of one family should – with a love full of mutual respect and imbued with humility. (Humility is always the hallmark of love.) Later on the gospel story Christ invites us to learn from Him meekness and humility of heart. These qualities should be mirrored in our dealings with each other within the Church and between our Churches, as well as in the Churches' interaction with the wider society in which we are called to bear witness to the gospel. Only when our Churches have well and truly espoused Christ's humility will they also reflect His graciousness. What is true for our Churches must be true for us at a personal level, of course – for, we are the Church.

I believe that we can and should hear the words of the prophet Isaiah read for us this morning as a reminder to us that as Church, as Christian people, we are called to be a Servant People, men and women configured to our Servant Lord. If Isaiah's *Servant Songs* have always been seen by the Christian tradition to describe the mission and ministry of Jesus they should also be heard and understood by us as a description of and a blueprint for our lives as Christian disciples. I would suggest that we read Isaiah's words today as a reminder to us that we should situate ourselves before each other as humble servants.

The prophet assures us that the Lord's Servant will bring justice and healing: the healing of our wounded memories, the pacification of our raw and fragile emotions. We all need such healing and pacification in our lives, for we have all been hurt in one way or another – and often by people we truly love and care for – something which makes the impact of the hurt endured so much more painful.

In a few moments we will sing the Creed and during its recitation we will be sprinkled with the water blessed at last evening's Office at Vigils celebrated here at the monastery. The sprinkling with blessed water symbolises our desire to return to the font of our own baptism; our desire to be brought to new life in Christ and to experience the healing, reconciling grace offered to us in this sacrament.

The tradition of returning to the waters of baptism on this feast is one our Orthodox brothers and sisters hold to dearly. They symbolise this readily by plunging themselves in flowing streams on Epiphany Day – their commemoration of the Baptism of the Lord.

We have many references to the fact that the first Christians would seek out flowing water – a spring, a well or a river – in which to be immersed. Every so often they would return to that place in order to be sprinkled afresh or to stand anew in its flowing stream to remind themselves that while their baptism was clearly a one-off, a once for always, event (we are never baptised more than once), it is a more than just a one moment in our lives. Its grace lives on in us for always. Truly understood, baptism engages us in a way of life, a way of being, which is constantly immersed in God. The Rite of the Blessing of the Waters for Epiphany in the Orthodox tradition, captures this sense when it has the priest pray aloud on the banks of the flowing waters wherein Christians will plunge themselves anew to mark the feast: *The voice of the Lord cries out across the waters saying: 'Come, all of you, and receive the spirit of wisdom, the spirit of understanding, the spirit of reverence of God who is shown to us in Jesus Christ, as He wades into the waters of the river Jordan, the river which rolls back its currents as it looks upon the Lord coming to be immersed'.*

Referring to John the Baptist's attitude of deference to Christ (something which is particularly emphasised in Matthew's gospel account of the baptism of Jesus – the one we read this year), the Orthodox Rite of *The Blessing of the Waters* has the priest speak these words in a part of the prayer in which he addresses Christ directly: *O Christ, the Forerunner, John the Baptiser, became all trembling as he looked upon You coming towards him. 'How can the candlestick illumine the Light?' he cried out, 'how can a slave lay hands upon his Lord?' Make me and these waters holy, O Saviour who takes away the sins of the world.*

What the priest then asks in prayer are some of the things we will recognise ourselves to stand in need of today. He pleads with and for the people: *Lord, make this a fountain of immortality, a gift of cleansing, a remission of sins, a healing of compulsive habits, a destroying of demons, a renewing of our God-given nature.* Are these not all things we long to experience in our lives?

We know that the Irish monks of time past would frequently stand in the waters of flowing streams and standing therein, their hands raised in prayer, they would recite the palms. They

would also present to God their prayers of petition for themselves and for others. It seems appropriate to conclude this morning's reflection with one prayer of petition from the Celtic tradition that has come down to us:

Lord,

Immerse us in Your pure water and Your gift of your tender heart.

Immerse us in Your healing water and Your gift of wisdom.

Immerse us in Your renewing waters and Your gift of reverence.

Amen!