

BAPTISM OF THE LORD (C)
Saint Odilia 2010

We celebrate today the feast of the Baptism of the Lord. It is one more celebration of Epiphany, a continuing revelation of the mystery of God's plan of salvation. In ancient tradition, three events were closely associated: the visit of the magi to the child Jesus, the baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan, and the changing of water to wine at Cana. We will hear that Gospel next Sunday on the Second Sunday of the Church year. Each of these feasts reveals something about the identity of Jesus, whose birth we celebrated so short a time ago. The visit of the magi reveals Jesus as Lord of the Nations. The Baptism of Jesus reveals him as beloved Son of God. The changing of water into wine reveals him as the Christ, the one who ushers in the age of the Messiah with its abundant blessings, symbolized by wine.

This feast of the Baptism is the last celebration of our Christian-Epiphany season. Tomorrow we begin the "Ordinary time" of the Church year. We once celebrated the Christmas-Epiphany season until the beginning of Lent and other Christian communities still do. That means that you can leave up your Christmas tree until Ash Wednesday!

Before the third century, Christians celebrated this feast of the Baptism as the first event in Christ story. After all, it was the Baptism of Jesus—not his birth—that marked the beginning of his ministry. Each Gospel writer tells us of the baptism of Jesus by John the Dipper, but the accounts are very brief. Luke's description in today's Gospel is only a part of one verse: "AFTER ALL THE PEOPLE HAD BEEN BAPTIZED AND JESUS ALSO HAD

ALSO HAD BEEN BAPTIZED AND WAS PRAYING....” This statement then leads to the epiphany: “...HEAVEN WAS OPENED AND THE HOLY SPIRIT DESCENDED UPON HIM...AND A VOICE CAME FROM HEAVEN, ‘YOU ARE MY BELOVED SON; WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED.’”

Did you notice that Luke tells us that Jesus was baptized along with all the people? Clearly, Jesus was not baptized as a sign of repentance for sin. He had no need for forgiveness. His baptism along with all the people is part of the epiphany, part of the revelation of his identity, a manifestation of what his service for us involves. Jesus walks into the water with us. In Jesus, God enters deeply into human life, identifying with us in the depths of our being. Jesus’ baptism reveals a God who identifies with people who are sinful, broken, and overwhelmed. God himself proclaims Jesus his beloved son, one of only two times God speaks from heaven in Luke’s Gospel.

Would it be easier, do you think, if we regularly heard a voice from heaven, booming like thunder, telling us how to live, what decisions to make, what job to take, where to live, whom to date, what college to attend, whom to marry, how to improve relationships, how to make money, how to parent, and the like? We know that’s not the way it works. God’s direction is much more subtle. According to Luke God only speaks this publicly to Jesus one additional time, at his transfiguration. At other times, even Jesus had to listen much more carefully. That the big difference in our lives. We don’t listen nearly as well.

At one time, we all heard a voice say over our waters of baptism those same words God speaks to Jesus. At our baptism we were called beloved

beloved daughters and sons of God. That baptismal call and identity persists throughout our lives. Baptism is the beginning of committed lives, the commitment God has made to us as the sons and daughters in whom he delights. Before we are anything else, before we are physicians or lawyers, or teachers or parents or students, we are God's children. And after all our titles have faded away, after youth and beauty depart, when wealth and influence come to an end, when our strength declines and even our minds and our memories are taken away from us, the divine voice remains: "YOU ARE MY BELOVED DAUGHTER; YOU MY SON, WHOM I CALL BY NAME. We look for many things for a sense of self-worth, achievements, relationships, income, success, recognition. We look in a whole lot of places to find that voice that will say to us: "You're somebody, you have worth, you have value." We want to be noticed; we want to be loved, and yet we know that ultimately all things fail us and many times even people. And even when they don't, we lose them in death, as time and again we surrender back to God the precious gift of life of the ones who love us. Only one word, only one voice endures forever, beyond what this life holds for us: "YOU ARE MY BELOVED, WITH YOU I AM WELL-PLEASED."

Today is also "Vocation Awareness Sunday." We've often reduced our notion of vocation to "one's state in life," and more still more narrowly to a religious vocation, a vocation to priesthood or the consecrated life. But there is only one vocation in the Church, our baptismal vocation, when we were chosen by God in the saving waters of baptism for life in the divine presence for eternity.

We generally think of vocation to priesthood first, because of our current situation. Unlike other vocations in the church, there appears to be a shortage of this one. The demographics are scary. I know the seminarians hated it when I spoke about the statistical trends, about where the declining number of clergy was headed. It did not look as if we were going to have enough priests to carry on the work of the Church. And now we are faced with closing parishes, and merging parishes, and not building the new parishes we need, because there are now, or soon will be, no priests to pastor them. Within your baptismal vocation, God may be calling you to greater service of your brothers and sisters as a priest or religious brother or sister. The job security is great and the benefits are out of this world.

We are also making an appeal for the Saint Paul Seminary. Envelopes are available on tables in the back, if you would like to make a contribution for the education of the men currently in the seminary preparing for service as parish priests. When I was there, the cost was about \$30,000 per year per student. We couldn't ask the students to pay, no one had that much money. Nor could they ever pay it back. It would require 1/4 of their salary for 50 years! I was dismayed to find out that the cost is now \$50,000 per year per student. But the church—you—deserve the best education we can provide in order that they may serve in increasingly complicated ministries with competence. I contribute to the seminary for a more selfish reason. I hope that there's someone to replace when I want to retire.