

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord (C)
St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes
January 9, 10, 2016

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11
Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7
Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Many parents think and say “our children grow up too fast”. Parents worry and even fear their children will see and hear things about the world before their ages and emotions make them ready to handle those sorts of heavy things.

Be all that as it may – and I have some of those same feelings myself – today the Church pushes us to consider a very significant moment in the life of Jesus, namely His Baptism. As we close the Christmas Season with this last weekend of Christmas Feasts, Jesus is no longer the infant in the manger, but the adult man being baptized for his mission in and to the world. Yes, speaking about someone growing up too fast!

Through His baptism, God designates Jesus as his 'alter-ego', his Son for the world. In His Baptism God shares the Holy Spirit with Jesus in a unique way. God did this so that His Son's work and mission in life would really be the Father's work as well. Our baptism does quite the same for us. (Emma's and Matthew's baptisms will do the same for them.) When we are baptized we are immersed into Jesus, made heirs of all that is God's, but also commissioned to be part of the ministry of Jesus on earth.

As we observe this Feast, it is important for us to recognize that the farther we are removed from the original experience and norm of anything, the easier it is for us to under-appreciate the event. It is the same with many things in our experience: 20 years after an event, it doesn't seem so important, so earth-changing. After the distance of years, and especially when we know of an event only by hearing about it from others, the experience doesn't have the punch and the fervor it had when first experienced. We know them only through pictures: (Oh! that was when we did that.) (Oh, I vaguely recall that happening!) Examples:

1. death of President Kennedy for some of us we remember exactly where we were and what we were doing. We remember who cried that day. For many others here today, it is only a piece of history you heard told in a Social Studies class.
2. 9/11 – As Vicar I worked next to a person who was vacationing in New York City the day of the terrorist attack. Her experience is much different and more vivid than mine could ever be.

After some time we lose the impact of the event, we lose touch with the meaning and the consequences of the event. Unless we make an effort to recall and stay in touch with the moment, we lose touch with how the experience is to affect our lives.

For a bit today I want to reflect on what Baptism was in the early Church. What is the norm for Baptism in our church, and from which we have deviated over the centuries?

First of all, if you go to Europe, or study Church history, you will learn that churches had baptistries connected to them. These baptistries were not small corner spaces in the church building. They were actual rooms, and often they were even separate buildings adjacent to the church itself. The walls were decorated with magnificent mosaics or frescoes depicting events of biblical history:

**the fall from grace in Eden, the great flood,
the crossing of the Red Sea, Moses striking the rock to obtain water,
and of course some depiction of today's gospel text, the Baptism of Jesus.**

The only thing in the baptism was a massive pool of water. But of course, this was the sole purpose for the room or building itself to house the baptismal pool. The person to be baptized would descend into this pool with their sponsor and the bishop or priest. The water was possibly chest-deep; the person would be dressed only for proper modesty. In the midst of the baptismal pool, the person would be immersed into the water, the bath of rebirth (as Titus says in today's Second Scripture), and then proceed to the other side of the pool. There they would rise out of the water and be clothed in a new white robe signifying their new life in Christ. *“Going down into the water initiates the process of forgiveness, coming out of the water begins the process of receiving the Holy Spirit.”*

That was baptism in the early days of our Church, and it is indeed still the norm. In those early days you could not know you were baptized; you could not know that you went into a death to your old way of life, and rose to a new way of life.

In today's second Scripture, the apostle Titus says, we are to be trained *“to reject godless ways and worldly desires, and to live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age,”* so that we can await the blessed appearance of our glorious God and Savior Jesus Christ. In today's First Scripture we hear how Jesus has been called *“to be a shepherd who feeds the flock, gathers and leads them with strong arms and a tender heart.”* And it was and is Baptism that sets us on that road, on that trajectory.

Fast forward, we easily realize how far we are removed from the norm of the early Church. We baptize infants, and thus we baptize people before they are catechized, and certainly before they can know the identity and the mission into which they are being baptized. And the way in which we baptize is also far from the norm of the early Church.

This is why it is so important that we stick close to the Scriptures, be involved in a faith and parish community, and pray and study as a family. We are far removed from the norm of the early Church, but we still have the same identity and the same mission. We just need to work harder today to know who we are and recognize what we are to do as baptized Catholic Christians. May we accept the challenge and the privilege.