

Within the Word: Baptism of the Lord

January 8–14

Epiphany–First Week in Ordinary Time

Within the Word

Baptism of the Lord

For people who learned that baptism forgives all sin, the baptism of Jesus seems like a strange episode to include in the liturgical year. Yet the fact of Jesus' baptism is almost incontrovertible. All four Gospels mention it, as does the Acts of the Apostles.

Still, even the evangelists seem to have felt some embarrassment. Mark, who wrote first, says quite openly that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan (1:9-10). Matthew agrees that Jesus was baptized, but first he records a conversation in which John objects to the idea (3:13-17). Luke puts the event in a subordinate clause, as if hoping that the reader will pass over it quickly (3:21). In the Fourth Gospel, John and Jesus meet, and John sees the Spirit descend on Jesus as a dove, but the evangelist never explicitly says that John baptized Jesus (John 1:32-33). In Acts of the Apostles, when Peter catechizes the household of Cornelius, he speaks of how, after the baptism that John preached, God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power (10:38). That all five books deal with the same issue makes it seem likely that the baptism of Jesus troubled the first Christians as well.

The baptism of Jesus also troubled the compilers of liturgical calendars. For example, the Roman Missal of Pius V (1570) assigned the Baptism of the Lord to January 13, and only when that was a weekday. The first Sunday after the Epiphany used to be Holy Family Sunday.

Whenever the Feast of the Holy Family fell on January 13, it bumped the commemoration of the baptism off the calendar.

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After the Second Vatican Council, the Feast of the Holy Family moved forward between Christmas and Epiphany to smooth the sequence of events. The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord is now normally observed on the Sunday after the Epiphany, the very day it had been forbidden to occupy. In some years (this year and next being two of them), when Christmas falls on a Sunday or a Monday, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord moves from Sunday to Monday. It is never omitted from the liturgical calendar.

The evangelists' differing accounts and the shifting of liturgical calendars notwithstanding, the baptism of Jesus never had anything to do with the forgiveness of sins. Jesus was without sin (Heb 4:15). Rather, throughout Christian tradition, Jesus' baptism is important because it reveals who he is: the Son of God. Some people erroneously believed that the baptism was the moment in which Jesus became the Son of God. But Jesus is God's *eternal* Son dwelling among us (John 1:14).

Some parish communities celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord with the rite of blessing and sprinkling water. Others include the baptism of infants, fulfilling Jesus' command to the disciples before his ascension: "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them all that I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19).

Baptism revealed Jesus as the eternal Son of God and launched his public ministry. Baptism gives the followers of Christ a share in his life. Baptism makes us adopted children of God, and it sends us into the world to proclaim God's name.

—Fr. Paul Turner

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