

First Sunday after the Epiphany  
The Baptism of Jesus  
Year B

Genesis 1:1-5  
Psalm 29  
Acts 19:1-7  
Mark 1:4-11

Today, we remember the baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan by John the Baptizer. In the passage from the Gospel according to Mark, there is a lot of symbolism and many confusing details which have puzzled the Church through the centuries. How can we make sense of it?

The first thing to look at is the entire rite of baptism - what are its origins, what does it mean, and how was John's version of baptism different than those that the people of Israel might have been familiar with? John did not invent the ritual of baptism. In Judaism, there were actually two different rites that used water - the rite of purification and the rite of baptism for proselytes. We will see reference to the rite of purification in the story of Jesus' miracle at the wedding feast in Cana. In this rite, the people wash themselves after they had been in contact with something viewed as unclean, as with the body of an animal or some discharge of bodily fluid. The rite would include washing one's body to ensure one did not contaminate anything else. The rite of baptism for proselytes was by immersion in water as we see with John's baptism, but viewed as a sign that one was clean from their former life and now a member of the Chosen People.

The Essene community, as best known from the community at Qumran and at the ruins of Masada, used ritual baptism as part of their daily life. Ritual cleansing was very important for this sect, but was not necessarily viewed as a symbol of change in the person undergoing this ritual. Thus, John's baptism as a sign of repentance was something new.

Another striking symbol associated with John was his wilderness experience. His appearing in the wilderness is a reminder of Moses and the Exodus, as well as Elijah coming out of the wilderness. This link with Elijah is further enhanced by the description we have of John - his attire and his diet are both reminiscent of the great prophet Elijah. This also raises the question of John's association with the Essenes, although there is no direct evidence of his ever being a member of this group. The fact that his father was a priest and the Essenes were known as a community of rural priests who felt the Temple priesthood had gone astray does point to that connection.

John was obviously a very charismatic person. He attracted people from all walks of life from a wide geographical area to come to him to undergo this baptism as a sign of repentance. The curious idea that Jesus also felt compelled to be baptized by John raises another question - why? If John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, why did Jesus need to undergo this baptism? Had He sinned?

While no one holds the opinion that Jesus was ever a sinner, the best explanation is that Jesus underwent this ritual to show solidarity with humanity. As we see in the temptation scene that

follows His baptism, Jesus always answers the tempter with a response that all people can use. He never resorts to using the power God has bestowed on Him. Throughout His ministry, we see many examples of Jesus identifying with the common people and this instance, His baptism, is just the beginning of that trend. Thus, the baptism of John combines many of the symbols we see throughout the Hebrew Scriptures - the use of water for purification, the prophet emerging in the wilderness, and the interaction of God with the common people of Israel.

In a few minutes, we will renew our baptismal covenant. We will remember our own baptisms, even if we were too young to actually remember that time in our life. In this rite, we will renounce evil and sin - admitting that we are susceptible to it, and reaffirm our commitment to follow the example Jesus set for us. However, we are never expected to fulfill this commitment on our own - it is always "with God's help." None of us has the power and strength to withstand the temptations we face on our own. In this life, we can only serve God and do the work God has called us to do "with God's help." And, as the concluding prayer states, "May Almighty God ... keep us in eternal life by his grace." God alone can get us through this life in faithful service to God's mission.