Good News

Why we celebrate Christ's baptism close to the Epiphany

Brother Silas Henderson, SDS | Jan 08, 2018

Hope is the virtue that takes us from Christmas into Ordinary Time in these January days. It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens,

> "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." —Mark 1:9-11

To receive baptism is an act of humility. After all, no one baptizes himself or herself. In accepting John's baptism, Jesus fully embraced what it means to be a human person, with all of humanity's weakness, limitations, and suffering. That Jesus, the Son of God, humbled himself in this way shows that he chose humility as the way he would redeem us.

As we have heard time and again in these Christmas days, the Savior of the world did not come with any sort of fanfare or grandeur. He came quietly into the world as a baby, the lowest and the least of humanity. Then, after spending 30 years in an obscure, out of the way village, he appeared quietly, in the company of sinners who were receiving John's baptism of repentance. This revelation, however simple and unobtrusive it might have been, is why our Catholic Tradition places the Baptism of the Lord alongside the visit of the Magi and the Wedding at Cana as part of the mystery of the Epiphany—the Manifestation of God's Power and Presence in Jesus the Christ.

These past two weeks have reminded us that we have a reason to hope because of the Incarnation. This mystery of God becoming a human being—which we have celebrated this Christmas Season—inspired the medieval Dominican mystic, Mesiter Eckart, to write,

> "As the special function of the eye is to see form and color, and of the ear to hear sweet tones and voices, aspiration is specific to the soul. To stop aspiring is sin. This energy of aspiration directed to and grasping God... is called Hope, which is also a divine virtue. Through this faculty the soul acquires such confidence that she deems nothing in the Divine Nature beyond her reach" (Sermon 7).

Hope is the virtue that takes us from Christmas into Ordinary Time in these January days. Hope draws our attention to the compassionate presence of Jesus as he walked among the crowds, preaching, teaching, and healing, never showing anything but the most profound compassion for those who were suffering. By accepting our humanity, and humbly embracing death, Jesus shows us how much God loves us:

> "In the four accounts of Jesus' life and death [i.e. the Gospels] you can see very clearly that the more conscious he becomes of the mission entrusted to him by the Father, the more he realizes that the mission will make him poorer and poorer. He has been sent not only to console poor people, but also to give this consolation as one of them himself" (Henri Nouwen, Letters to Marc about Jesus).

As we give thanks for the grace that has been revealed to us in the Christmas days, the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord is also a time for us to reflect on the gift of our own baptism: In this sacrament, we have been united with Christ and have been lifted up above our broken human nature, become sharers in God's divine nature.

What does the baptism of Jesus teach you about humility?

What insights does the baptism of Jesus give you into the gift of your own baptism and your identity as the Father's beloved child?

How can you carry the hope of the Christmas season into the days of Ordinary Time?

Words of Wisdom: "The Father of immortality sent his immortal Son and Word into the world; he came to us to cleanse us with water and the Spirit ... He breathed on us the spirit of life and armed us with incorruptibility. Now if we become immortal, we shall also be divine; and if we become divine after rebirth in baptism through water and the Holy Spirit, we shall also be coheirs with Christ after the resurrection of the dead."—Saint Hippolytus

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