

The Baptism of Jesus

The Church's liturgical year opens with Advent, a season of preparation for the celebration of the central mystery of our Christian faith – the Incarnation. Now after celebrating Christmas and Epiphany, we enter into what is called Ordinary Time during which we relive the period of Jesus' public ministry. The First Sunday of Ordinary Time celebrates the event which marked the beginning of this ministry – the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan. The Spirit of God whose love, embracing the Virgin Mary, brought about the conception of Jesus, now comes down upon him, overwhelming him with love and inspiring him to carry this love out to others.

The scene begins simply. John's baptism has just been described as a 'baptism for repentance' (Mark 1:4), that is to say, a baptism the aim of which was to open people up to think differently about God and about their lives and to respond to the good news of God's redeeming love. Mark states that Jesus was baptised by John. From the beginning of his entry into public life we see Jesus mixing with sinners and choosing to identify with them. In seeking baptism, Jesus too must have been looking for a new heart and a new mind: a new vision of how he and his contemporaries might break free from sin. He himself – so those who knew him tell us – was sinless, but he certainly felt the weight of sin all around him, and, as we shall see, he closely identified with those who were its victims. Jesus must have often experienced the burden of helplessness as he found himself confronted with the despondency, pain and distraction surrounding him and the emptiness of the religious forms that left people in their sin and in their misery. The intimacy of his own experience of God must have led him to believe that there had to be a better way. Hearing of John, he left his home town of Nazareth and joined the pilgrims who listened to John's preaching and accepted his baptism.

This baptism proved to be a turning point in Jesus' life. We know virtually nothing about him prior to this day. After it he emerges as a preacher and a healer and an extraordinary witness to love as he gathered disciples around him and began a movement that was still growing at the time Mark wrote his gospel.

Jesus had always known a special intimacy of love from God, but on this day he is so overwhelmed by it that he has to take this experience into the silence of the desert and then finds himself compelled to go out to others to tell them that God wishes to say to everyone what he says to Jesus: 'You are my son/ daughter. I love you. I delight in you'. These words are taken from an ancient song found in the book of Isaiah. The Spirit that characterises Jesus is the Spirit of God's love. Everything Jesus says and does comes from the intimate communion that he has with God. He wants to reveal God's love to the whole world and he will do it gently for he is 'gentle and humble in heart' (Matthew 11:29).

As we begin again in this season of 'Ordinary Time' to journey with Jesus, learning to live more closely as his disciples, I am sure that we can identify with the blind who need to be enlightened by him. How often we fail to see: fail to see the sacred mystery unfolding in our own lives and in the lives of those who are closest to us; blind to what God is calling us to; unable to discern God's will. I am sure that we can identify with those who cry out to be released from the prisons in which they find themselves: locked into destructive relationships; imprisoned by ignorance, by childhood hurts, by prejudices, by compulsions, by habits of giving in to superficial desires that run counter to our deepest longings.

Jesus wants to free us from all that holds us bound. He wants to heal us by his love. Let us recall our own baptism and today let us renew the promises made on our behalf at our own baptism and in so doing renew our commitment to follow Jesus, even though it be to the cross, for he is the Way, the Truth and the Life and he will take us to the goal for which we most long: intimate communion of love with God and so with the whole of creation.