

IN YOUR BAPTISM, JESUS' RIGHTNESS WITH THE FATHER IS YOURS

Hear the Word of God on this Day the Church celebrates the righteousness of God declared in the Baptism of our Lord:

But answering, Jesus said to him, "You must permit it now. For thus it remains fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permits Him.¹

Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

For believers early in the life of the New Testament Church, the appearance of Jesus as God and Man in One Person for all people was very important. It was so much so that the Church celebrated His Epiphany decades before they added the Feasts of the Ascension and Nativity to the calendar. By the early AD 200s, that which became the third of the five Major Feasts held each year in Christian Churches was being annually celebrated in order to help the faithful remember the Baptism of the Son of God. In that event, they beheld the divine reason for Jesus' Epiphany, that is, the Son of God's appearance on earth.

Those of us who were present here this past Tuesday evening or Wednesday morning may remember that over a time span of around 225 years, the Church chose to change her readings for the annual Epiphany Feast. The texts recalling the Baptism of our Lord, narrated by all four evangelists, were gradually replaced by remembering the visit of the Wise Men, or Magi. That left remembrance of that which was needed to be done to accomplish all righteousness available for another day.

For us, it is good that today's Gospel narrative was chosen, long, long, ago, to remain in the Epiphany season. That is because it centers us in the reasons for God coming to earth in our flesh. We, unlike the Early Church, are blessed to have the Christmas season. We have recalled in the Nativity Season just passed, God being birthed in our flesh; His Circumcision and naming which placed Him under God's

¹ *Matthew 3:15.*

Holy Law; Jesus' presentation in the Temple; and His flight to and return from Egypt which fulfilled ancient prophecy.

Now, the Season of God's appearance as Man among men has begun. We remember today that He who gave the Holy Law, and was placed under it for the benefit of law-breaking humans, also came to fulfill God's righteousness, for us, for you. That means that Jesus who first spilled His holy blood on the eighth day of His life after birth in order to defeat sin, death and the devil, also came to complete all the Father's requirements to make us unholy people right with our holy God.

The end of today's Gospel reading makes that clear. It recalls the day when Jesus' mission was made clear to Him and John at the Jordan, and to all who would hear of it after the four Gospels began to circulate around the world. St. Matthew declares:

Then behold, (a) Voice from the heavens saying, "This One remains My Son, the Beloved One in Whom I am well pleased."²

That is the Father's judgment on that which Jesus did at the River Jordan as He was baptized by his earthly cousin. That declaration seals for all time the importance of Jesus' baptism for all people, and most especially for those who continue to believe in Him. That Word sealed the meaning, for all time, of the events which began as St. Matthew declares:

Then Jesus comes alongside, from Galilee by the Jordan, toward John to be baptized by him.³

Parallel texts declare that John was preaching a baptism into, or for, the forgiveness of sins. People were coming to him, confessing their sins, and being washed in preparation of the Coming One. That One would wash them with water and the Word and give them the Holy Spirit (though they could not state that biblical

² Matthew 3:17.

³ Matthew 3:13.

reality then with that kind of clarity). From the midst of confessing repentant sinners comes forth the sinless Son of God and Mary.

We do not know the exact location at the River Jordan where John's washings took place. We know that the river essentially flows from the Sea of Galilee in the North. We know, from the biblical records, that Jesus came to John from Galilee. In time, both the Talmud and early Church records up to the 6th century placed the baptism site near to the Sea of Galilee. This would be where the relatively clean waters of the Jordan would come forth in a rush from the Sea. From that point, before picking up minerals, the Jordan slowed and descended to end in the Dead Sea to the South, some 1,300 feet below sea level.

In a spiritual way, those who were coming to John confessing their sins were entering the non-polluted headwaters of the river with the filth of their sins still on them. The water that washed over them flowed to the terminus of the river in the Dead Sea. That means that it is dead in more ways than one. (Remember John's baptism was not a washing of regeneration and renewal, but preparatory to the Lord's establishment of that Baptism). In terms of ritual washings, the river, even at its cleanest point had become unclean on account of sin. It was into this reality that Jesus, the sinless One, came forth. Perhaps that makes this narrative make a bit more sense:

But John tried to prevent Him, repeatedly saying, "I have need to be baptized by You; yet You come to me?"⁴

John knew that he was not the Christ. God had revealed to him that his calling was preparatory for One coming who was greater than he (St. John's Gospel tells us that, and more). John knew he was a sinner, and God had let him know, somehow, that the Coming One was not. Elsewhere in Scripture, John the Baptizing One declares that One would bring a very different baptism.

That, among many other reasons which can be gleaned, or directly learned, from the Scriptural witness, is why John repeatedly refused to wash Jesus.

⁴ *Matthew 3:14.*

After all, Jesus was conceived, born, and lived as the pure, sinless Son of God. John, faced with the One Whose baptism would wash away sins, does what the Faith demands. He says, "I have need to be baptized by You."

For those among us who were privileged, or participated in, the two baptisms Jesus performed here last month, are free to testify that the adage, "Faith demands baptism," is true. Both Katie and Louise are of ages which allow them to comprehend, confess and desire the blessings of baptism after some instruction in the Faith. John the Baptizer was, at the time of Jesus' baptism, between their ages. He had the added gift of Divine revelation beginning in his mother's womb. He knew the One before Him had come to bring forgiveness and he was confused. Here is the question to be answered: How is One without sin, Who has nothing to repent, no sins to confess, to be washed with sinners into the forgiveness of sins? Our text gives God's answer to that query:

But answering, Jesus said to him, "You must permit it now. For thus it remains fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permits Him.⁵

Jesus does not argue with John. He gives an imperative, "You must permit it now." Jesus does not even dialogue with John. He just tells him to do it and gives one reason, "For thus it remains fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus' appeal, to which John yields, is to God's righteousness. That is the Word which declares people right with Him.

Sometime later, after John is imprisoned, Jesus proclaims the divine necessity of His own baptismal day. After declaring what we call the Beatitudes in that which the Church calls the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares that He came not

⁵ Matthew 3:15.

*to dismantle the Law or the Prophets...but to fulfill.*⁶ So, I ask you, Jesus is baptized by John to fulfill what?

Go to the Scripture for your answer. St. Matthew records Jesus' reason: *it remains fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.* What does this mean?

Jesus needs this baptism, not that He might come into repentance, but that He might become the sin-Bearer for the people. He Who steps into the Jordan, without sin in or on Himself, enters into waters made unclean by the washing of sinners. That which the Baptizer used to wash over those repenting of their sins, now floods around Jesus. The waters come and spiritually cover the sinless One in sin.

From that moment on, Jesus becomes a sin magnet. He pulls sin and its effects off sinners and it clings to Him. John gets that. We know that, for the text, by its choice of word forms, indicates that Jesus spoke His command and the Divine Rationale only once, and John permitted the righteousness of God to be fulfilled in Jesus' Baptism.

John would have known the Old Covenant prophecies concerning God's righteousness in the Christ. Precisely which prophecy or divine sayings entered into John's mind that day we do not know. Yet he would have been familiar with today's reading from Isaiah, which proclaims in part:

*I am YHWH. I have called You in righteousness. I have caused to take You by the hand, and kept You. I have given you (as a) covenant to the people, (a) light to the nations.*⁷

⁶ Matthew 5:17.

⁷ Isaiah 42:6.

John, like you, a well-catechized son of a priestly family (you are part of the New Covenant priesthood), knew the Word He was baptizing. From his infancy in his mother's womb, John heard her quote the Old Testament as she awaited his own birth.⁸ His father was a priest, one who was in the ranks which served in Temple duty. The Word was in his home all his life. Is the Word of God in heard in your household, through your lips, in your ears, into your hearts and out of your lives not just here but where you spend most of your time?

How will you know, believe and own the fulfillment of the Word when it comes to you if it is not?

Hear John's call: Repent! Then, believe Jesus' call – the Gospel! He Who had no sin became sin for you. Know that Jesus was washed in your sins. When He gave you the washing of your Baptism, you received His spiritual cleanness. He was clothed in your unholiness and washed you in His holiness. We return our thought to today's inspired Word, as our text continues:

Then, having been baptized, Jesus immediately came up from the water. And behold, were opened to Him the heavens and He saw the Spirit of God descending like (a) Dove, also coming upon Him.⁹

Oh, there is so much in today's text and so little time each year to proclaim it! Now, in the eyewitness account testified to by both Jesus and John, comes another Person. This is the Holy Spirit. In this instance, He descends upon Jesus in the form of a dove. He is another witness, silent, but present in an image which recalls God's deliverance of the eight on Noah's Ark, with wings that show He can fly wherever He wills. God gives testimony to the anointing Jesus is receiving.

Yes, He is washed with sin. Yet, He is also then, through that washing, preparing to go forth to face that to which all sinners fall at some time, temptation. From there, He will go into the world, continually drawing sin from sinners onto

⁸ Genesis 30:23.

⁹ Matthew 3:16.

Himself. As the Spirit descends, He anoints Jesus into His ministry – that is, of reconciling sinners with the Sinless One. It is fulfilling prophecy, such as our Psalm (85 MT) today declares, *Truth out of the earth (is) made to rise up...* Jesus steps forth from the waters, *and righteousness out of the heaven looks down*, as St. Matthew records:

Then behold, (a) Voice from the heavens saying, “This One remains My Son, the Beloved One in Whom I am well pleased.”¹⁰

That was the Father’s witness. He will give it again, as you will hear in just a couple of weeks. Then He will tell you to hear the beloved Son. Now He declares that it pleases Him that Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness for you. In Jesus’ Baptism your sins are taken on Him. In your baptism, Jesus’ rightness with the Father is poured over you. That means, in God’s sight, His testimony is about you: *“This One remains My Son, the Beloved One in Whom I am well pleased.”¹¹*

The peace which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus

The Baptism of Jesus (Historic One-year series)

Psalm 85; Isaiah 42:1-7; I Corinthians 1:26-31; Matthew 3:13-17

January 11, 2015

Pastor Michael A. Morehouse

Soli Deo Gloria

¹⁰ *Matthew 3:17.*

¹¹ *Matthew 3:17.*