

The Baptism of our Lord (Matthew 3:13-17) 12 January 2014

John Baptist became the public promoter and herald of the Messiah, the long-awaited hope of Israel. At River Jordan, John thundered with white-hot passion, to turn people's stone-cold hearts to warm, loving kindness. He plunged people under Jordan water, as an immersion to drown their old way of living.

Jesus joined the queue of sinners for baptism. Recognizing him, John balked and queried why the Holy one of God should be baptized? Jesus answered, "Let it be so to fulfil all righteousness." He meant "This is the way God requires of us." It was as if Jesus said "I'm here with you now 100%; I am here for the long haul. I am completely immersed and involved in your world." He went on, "You seem to have got yourselves hopelessly stuck in keeping the old, cold, loveless letter of the Law. I want to show you what God is really like, a God who doesn't want bootlicking man-made laws, but, who wants to see justice, love and peace done wholesale and done willingly. I'm like a brother come to show you God's perfect way to live. And, as for Australia, I'm here to help you bring all God's beloved creation, all that God once called "good" in Genesis, back to Garden of Eden peace and harmony, even at the cost of my life."

John Baptist had chosen an impeccable locale on Jordan's bank to call folk to repentance. It was here the Exodus people passed over through water from wilderness wandering into the Land of Promise; here, the double portion of prophet Elijah's spirit and mantle descended on his successor, Elisha, as Elijah ascended in a chariot of fire.; and, so it was here that the same Spirit led Jesus to find the second Elijah, John Baptist, to receive the fullness of God's Holy Spirit in Baptism.

As Jesus came up from under life-giving Jordan water, the vivid, blue veil of the heavens was rent asunder. Perhaps, it gave a preview glimpse of the Cross and Resurrection hitherto sealed to Jesus, but hinted at by saintly Simeon at his presentation thirty years before. Then, a dove, the eloquent, empowering symbol of the Holy Spirit of God, alighted on Jesus, to give him God's green-light, a push-along of encouragement and affirmation that he was acting true to God's plan. A dove was the symbol of peace after storm, as she returned to the Ark with a fresh olive twig in her beak; a dove was the symbol of gentle serenity, tenderness, guileless-ness, modesty and meekness. A dove has no talons, no fierceness, only soft, loving friendship, as Jesus' ministry would be. Jesus' very first sermon would be dove-like. "The spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, and to give sight to the inly blind." (Luke 4:18)

With the dove at Jesus' baptism came a voice from Heaven "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased," or "who brings me great joy as a dutiful Son."

When our two grandsons from London were younger, I used to have so much joy with them that I'm going to have my grandchildren *first* next time. What, with police checks, I soon won't be able to do it, but our grandchildren used love a hug and a hoist in the air. They loved an embrace and a lift, and they squealed "Do it again! Do it again!" (I would, if the old back stands up to it.) At our

baptism, Jesus puts his arms around us and hugs us to himself and lifts us up like children. All we can say is “Do it again! Do it again!” And he will through word and sacrament all through our life. At our baptism, we become sisters and brothers of the Lord. He calls us by name and we hear him say of us, “You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased. I want you for a great dream to love and help others that is lying dormant in you, which only you can do.” Our baptism is also a passport to an instant world-wide supportive church community. On our London living grandchild’s fifth birthday, we took Charlie to church and my wife promised “Afterwards, we’ll get a cake.” Through the sermon, there rose thought bubbles between us...” Where on earth do foreigners buy a birthday cake on a London Sunday morn?” Why did we worry? We are baptized friends of Jesus, and, at the notices, the vicar broadcast “After Mass there is a *cake* stall for the Botswana relief.” There, in the middle of a tempting array, was some parish saint’s labour of love, a chocolate-icing cake peppered with Smarties. Our world-wide company of saints by baptism had come through with the goods, and a little boy’s eyes were out on stalks. A new point: In the early Church, around the warm Mediterranean, baptism was for adults only by total immersion. But, as the Church spread to northern climes, total immersion in an icy stream in mid-winter could be a death sentence, so the three-fold sprinkling became the way, with a touch of balsamic oil. Previously, the candidate plunged into and under water to emerge and be wrapped in a scented white robe. This was more than a dip; it was a dedication. The full immersion signified death to selfish self and a rising to a generous unselfish new life. In time, the white robe became baby’s white christening gown, a treasured heirloom, to link generations in a deeply personal way. As one of the fossilized cave-dwelling clergy, I like to add the rite of the ancient Church, wherein baby’s gown was touched with the words “This white robe is a sign of your Christian dignity. May you bring that dignity unstained into the eternal life of heaven.”

Baptism begins the human journey to perfection; death brings it to completion. At the requiem stands the Easter candle, from which the baptismal candle was once lighted. The Easter candle is the symbol of Risen Christ’s victory over the very worst the world could do. Now, the candle beckons us on. “Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I know by faith, that, where there is shadow, there must be light to cause it, and you, Risen Jesus, the Light of the World, are closeby to walk me through,” to call to me “Come now,” after life’s fitful fever is done. The body is once more sprinkled with baptismal water, which is also a symbol of our tears, for Jesus humanly wept at the grave of Lazarus, his dearest friend.

In a good funeral, the coffin is draped in a white pall to symbolize yester-year’s white baptismal robe, and the almost same words can be repeated: “Thank God, you have brought your Christian dignity unstained into the life of heaven. Well done, good and trustful one. Enter now into the joy of your Lord. You are my daughter/son in whom I am well pleased. Under the white pall lies princess or pauper, for all are equal in death, equal save for one small item: the casket

has inscribed the name, the birth date, a simple dash, and the death date.
Baptized daughter/son of this parish, what will you have put in your dash?
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