

1st Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B, 2009  
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During the Season after the Epiphany, the Church seeks a greater understanding of Christ. To know Christ is to make him known and we cannot know him unless we allow him, through the work of the Holy Spirit, to dwell in us and lead us into discipleship. Discipleship begins with baptism. In baptism, we die to self and are born again into the life of Christian believing. Sins, whatever they are, are washed away. We are raised up into the life of the Resurrection and become a new being, a new person and a member of Christ's One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. In the words of our evangelical Christians, we are born again.

On this First Sunday after the Epiphany, the Church, in the gospel reading, tells us of the baptism of Jesus. Jesus came from the region of Galilee to the Jordan River, where John the Baptist was preaching on the need for humanity to renounce sin, to turn from foolish ways and to walk a morally straight path in the presence of Almighty God. The message of John is an ageless message. The flip side of the good news of free will is that in choosing right from wrong we have the option of choosing wrongly. The state of humanity, left to its own devices, is very often sin. I have never really understood why it is that so often any of us, equipped with the sure and certain knowledge that to give in to temptation will produce consequences that we do not want, will nonetheless do those things which we ought not to do. At least I am in good company in wondering this and having no good answer. Even Saint Paul acknowledged that knowledge of God's law seemed only to lead him into ever bigger violations of the law, and that his only hope was through redemption in Jesus Christ. John the Baptist said that humanity must turn from this way of sin and death, or face the consequences. Repent, John said, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.

Why, then, was Jesus baptized? All we can say is that scripture tells us that Jesus asked to be baptized to fulfill all righteousness; at least we are told that in Matthew's version – not in Mark's account or in Luke's. But let's go with Matthew's commentary, here, because it is at least a hint of why Jesus sought baptism. A righteous person, in Jewish understanding, was one who followed the commandments of God and was faithful to God. Clearly, Jesus believed that God, his Father, wanted him to be baptized, and to be baptized at the hands of John. God responded in the presence of all that were witnesses to our Lord's act of obedience. God said, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

The baptism was a key moment in the life of Jesus and it is a key point in our understanding of the Lord. This is the moment of the beginning of our Lord's three years of earthly ministry. This action marks the beginning of his preaching, his healing and his teaching and it sets him on the road to Calvary and the empty tomb. Baptism symbolizes, in the life of Jesus, unwavering commitment to do the work of his Father in this world and to ultimately die for us that we might live as children of Almighty God.

Is our baptism like Jesus'? The answer is both "No" and "Yes." No, it is not like Jesus' in that we are sinners in the need of forgiveness. We ought to be obedient, yet we know that we are not. Baptism is necessary for our salvation, and in being baptized we are brought in to God's Kingdom in a very special way. Sin is forgiven and we are made members of his Holy Catholic Church. We become brothers and sisters of the Savior, children of the one and only God.

But, our baptism is like our Lord's baptism, in that is a starting point for a life of obedience and servanthood, a life of discipleship. Because the Church baptizes young children and infants, as well as those coming to Christianity as adults, we must, when we become sufficiently mature to understand the gift of grace in baptism, acknowledge this great gift of God's unconditional love. In obedience, we must acknowledge God's gift of salvation and take upon ourselves the call to discipleship and live, with the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit the life of a devout and holy life as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Baptism is our beginning. Baptism starts us out on the King's highway, the "Highway to Heaven." Each of us will find the road different, that the path of life takes us along different ways with different challenges and different opportunities. But for all of us, baptized into new life, the call is the same: let us know Christ, and make him known.  
*Amen.*