

Epiphany means revelation, and in the Christian context it specifically means the revelation of Jesus Christ. On the Feast of the Epiphany, this past January 6th, we celebrated the revelation of the Baby Jesus to the Oriental kings, a symbolic expression that God sent his Son into the world for all humanity. During the season after the Epiphany, which runs, of course until Lent, the Church, in its teaching, seeks to build upon that revelation, bringing us to an ever-increasing knowledge of what it is to know Christ and to make him known. But if one thing is certain, it is that knowing Christ is not something that we can go about on our own. Oh, I do not mean that we can not study and learn much about Jesus on our own initiative. In fact, as Christians doing our duty, we must indeed diligently pursue the knowledge and love of our Lord by study and reflection. But we soon discover that our efforts are in vain unless we are guided by the Holy Spirit, for in our triune understanding of God we know that the mission, if you will, of the Third Person of the Trinity is exactly that of the Church and every member thereof: to know Christ and to make him known. The Holy Spirit quickens our study and brings it to life. The Holy Spirit plants Jesus in our heart.

The gift of the Spirit comes to us in baptism and with our baptism we start on the life-long journey of discipleship – knowing Christ and making him known. This is what Christian discipleship is all about; nothing more. Our role and our reason for being, is to know Christ and make him known. So we must understand that baptism is the seminal event of our lives and it brings in us a metamorphosis. We are changed and become a new creation in Jesus Christ. So, this Sunday, the First Sunday after the Epiphany is special. It is the Sunday to reflect on baptism – our own baptism in the light of our Lord's baptism.

This Sunday, each year, we read one of the Gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus. The practice never changes, for those who follow the lectionary. The version that we read in Luke's gospel is edited and truncated, but when we look more broadly we discover that 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. But the realization of what John the Baptist was doing, and what he was saying about what he was doing, begs the question of why Jesus got baptized, since we are taught, by Holy Scripture, that he alone, among all humanity, was, is and will be forever without sin. So why 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. So even though this is the year for reading Luke, let's focus on Matthew's version for the moment. Because it gives us at least a hint as to why Jesus sought baptism at the hands of John. When John argued with Jesus that he, John, was not worthy to baptize Jesus, Jesus said these words: "Let it be so, for now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." This is operative in understanding our Lord's desire for baptism. Righteousness! 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 fulfillment of righteous duty is the only explanation that we will ever have as to why Jesus was baptized as a symbolic renunciation of sin, because that is what John's baptism meant, and we very much understand Christian baptism as both as washing away sin and as initiation into the Church – the Body of Jesus Christ. We can say this about our Lord's baptism, though. 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 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 it 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, living by the guidance and direction of the Holy Spirit lives of devotion and service.

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.*