

we have no energy left to pay attention to the Church.

God's call, God's salvation, God's Church is more embracing than we sometimes think. The feast of Epiphany invites all of us to widen our horizons.

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

What difference does the universality of God's call to salvation make to me?

How does my parish look beyond its own immediate interests?

The Baptism of the Lord (A)

Acts 10:34-38

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord is not an ancient celebration in the calendar of the Western church. Originally Jesus' baptism was celebrated together with the miracle at Cana on January 6. These two events constituted subsidiary themes to the adoration of the Magi. They were further expressions of the overall theme of the manifestation of Jesus' divinity and power. A separate observance of Jesus' baptism was assigned to January 13, the octave day of Epiphany, in 1960. In the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord was assigned to the Sunday after January 6. If Epiphany happens to fall on that Sunday, the Baptism of the Lord is celebrated on the following Monday.

The second reading for this celebration in each of the three years of the lectionary's cycle (unless the optional readings for Years B and C are used) is a reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Though large sections of Acts are used each year in the first readings for the Sundays after Easter, this feast is the only time that Acts is used as a source for a Sunday's second reading.

The reason is that this reading from Acts 11 is the only time that Jesus' baptism is referred to in the New Testament outside the Gospels. (Some scholars think that Acts 1:22 is also a reference to the baptism of Jesus by John, but this does not seem to be certain.)

In our reading we find Peter preaching to the gentile Cornelius and his household. Peter and Cornelius have been brought together by visions from God. Peter now enunciates the basic lesson that God seems to be teaching them: Persons of every nation are included in God's will for salvation.

Peter hastens to observe that God's project of salvation was proclaimed to the Jews, all over Judea and Galilee, by Jesus. The proclamation started with Jesus' baptism by John when God identified and equipped Jesus as the Messiah. (This is the significance of Jesus' being "anointed...with the Holy Spirit and power.") After that initial manifestation, Jesus engaged in a ministry of healing and exorcism.

Our liturgical reading ends here, but Peter's speech in Acts goes on to describe how Jesus died and rose from the dead and how the significance and power of Jesus' ministry has continued to be announced by his apostles.

It would not be incorrect to say that the feast of the Baptism of the Lord is the feast of continuity. Its placement at the closure of the Christmas season and at the beginning of Ordinary Time reassures us that the Jesus whose birth we have just celebrated is the same Jesus who preached the saving plan of the Father through his public ministry. Peter's assurance to Cornelius that "every nation" is "acceptable" to God suggests that we, too, are being addressed by the same Savior who was identified as Messiah by God's voice as he was being baptized by John in the Jordan.

It's all of a single piece. It all hangs together. It all constitutes one continuous story: Jesus' birth, his baptism, his ministry, his death and resurrection, his proclamation by his first followers, his offer of himself to every nation through the agency

of his Church. It's all part of God's one project of salvation.

Jesus and his Father are as much concerned about our salvation, here and now, as they were about the salvation of the first Jew and gentile believers back then. Jesus is Messiah for us as he was for them. The public ministry that began with the baptism of Jesus still continues through the agency of his Church. There is a great, overarching continuity of ministry and mission being exercised by God on our behalf.

But we are not passive recipients in all this. We are also workers in the project. Because each of us shares the one, continuous life of the risen Christ, we also share his mission. We are called, as the apostles were, to be witnesses to his presence, his power, his providence for us. Together with each other, together with Christ, all believers constitute the one body of the Church that is the body of Christ. We, too, like Christ, have been anointed "with the Holy Spirit and power."

Some Christian believers seem to have the impression that only the ordained or only those who engage in formal, professional ministry are responsible for carrying on the mission of Jesus. They think that the rest, the vast majority of the Church's members, are there to take advantage of what the Church and its ministers offer them, to go shopping in the vast spiritual supermarket into which God has invited them. This is not authentic Christianity. Real faith and real commitment involve continuity with Christ, that is, consciously being part of the ministry of Jesus, deliberately carrying out the mission to which he was called, sharing in the mission of his Church. The public life of Jesus that began when he was baptized by John still continues—in us.

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

Where do I find the ministry of Jesus in my life?

How do I participate in the Church's continuation of Jesus' ministry?

The Baptism of the Lord (Optional B)

I John 5:1-9

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord is a kind of overlap celebration. We again see John the Baptist, whom we last met on the Third Sunday of Advent. We mark the closure of Jesus' hidden life that began at Christmas, and continue the manifestation theme of Epiphany. And we begin Ordinary Time, that part of the Church's year in which the Gospels present to us the public life and preaching of Jesus.

When Jesus received baptism from John it was a sign of his association of himself with sinful humanity, but also the sign of the beginning of his public participation in the religious life of his time. It marked the official, public beginning of his ministry of salvation. The importance of the occasion was marked by the Spirit descending upon him in the form of a dove and by the voice from heaven that proclaimed that Jesus was God's beloved Son.

The optional apostolic reading for Year B is from the first letter of John, which we will be hearing from again six times on the Sundays after Easter. It's a somewhat rambling and repetitious letter, and the selection for today is a difficult passage. Of passages like this, Saint Augustine says that if they "were not cloaked in mystery, they would never be searched in earnest. And if they weren't searched in earnest, they would not be opened up with such pleasure" (Sermon 8.18). Let's now search in earnest.

This passage seems to have been chosen for today because it alludes to the baptism of Jesus. Its author presumes that his readers are familiar with the Gospel of John.

The first part of the reading is about faith and love. We are made children of God through faith in Jesus. If we love our Father, we should also love the children who are like him. This love, both of the Father and of the Father's children, is marked by keeping the commandments. These commandments are not a burden, but a means of our overcoming the sinfulness of the

world even as Jesus overcame the sinfulness of the world. We are victorious because he was victorious.

But how do we know he was victorious? Because God has testified to his victory and that's a testimony we ought to accept. And how did God testify to the success of Jesus' mission? For one thing, there was the witness of the Spirit who proclaimed Jesus' sonship at his baptism. But there was more to Jesus' mission than the public announcement of it when he was baptized by John. Jesus also carried out his mission in his saving death for us, a death whose meaning was expressed when Jesus "delivered over the Spirit" to the world (see John 19:30), and when, together with his sacrificial blood, the living water that he had promised (see John 7:38) came forth from his side (see John 19:34). Here, then, are three witnesses to the authenticity of Jesus' mission from the Father: the Spirit, the living water and the self-sacrificial blood. These witnesses certify and validate the work of Jesus in conquering sin. They are witnesses that call for our response of faith, a faith that makes us children of the Father.

The earthly ministry of Jesus stretched from his baptism by John until his human death, in both of which God's Spirit participated. In his death, Jesus "delivered over the Spirit" to those who would believe in him. This gift of the Spirit that arose out of the death of Jesus is still conferred on believers of today "through water and blood," that is, through the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist. The saving mission of Jesus continues and the sign of its continuation is the ongoing gift of the Spirit in his sacramental ministry of today. Spirit, water and blood still give witness to God's will to make us his children, called to love one another in him.

One of the lessons inherent in the Church's observance of "Ordinary Time," which begins with the celebration of Jesus' baptism, is that the ministry of Jesus is still going on. As we listen to the Gospel readings from Mark (with some supplementary passages from John) during this Year B, we need to be aware that it is not just an account of past happenings that is presented. It is

Jesus addressing himself to us, inviting our response of faith as he invited the response of the people of his time. Our live letter today, which serves as a commentary on the gospel reading, invites us to a renewed appreciation of that ministry of Jesus that began with the baptism of John and ended on the cross. The Spirit that testified to the sonship of Jesus is the Spirit that is offered to us to enable us to give continued testimony in our lives to Jesus and to his ongoing work of salvation. Jesus' gift of life in baptism and his gift of himself in the Eucharist are the means by which Jesus extends his mission to us and enables us in turn to carry it on as his brothers and sisters in our heavenly Father. This celebration of the beginning of Jesus' public ministry is not just about Jesus. It's about us, too.

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

How do I carry on the mission of Jesus?

How are baptism and Eucharist signs of Jesus' victory over the sinfulness of the world?

The Baptism of the Lord (Optional C)

Titus 2:11-14, 3:4-7

The feast of the Baptism of the Lord is a pivotal celebration in the Church's liturgical year. It marks the conclusion of the hidden life of Christ (which we have commemorated during the Christmas season) and the beginning of his public ministry (which we will relive with him during Ordinary Time).

The birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus were all directed toward our salvation, toward delivering us from our natural, inherited subjection to sin, toward giving us a new value that God would treasure forever. The optional second reading that

the lectionary offers us for Year C is about salvation.

This reading is from the letter to Titus, a short book of the New Testament from which only two readings are selected for public proclamation in the liturgy. The first (2:11-14) is used at midnight Mass on Christmas, the second (3:4-7) at the dawn Mass on Christmas. Our reading for the Baptism of the Lord in Year C is a combination and repetition of these two readings.

The letter to Titus (whether authored by Saint Paul personally, or by one of his disciples) encourages Titus to be careful about the kinds of people he assigns to leadership in the church and to promote healthy relationships among the various groups that constitute church membership. The two separate passages that make up this Sunday's reading give the reason why Titus should be so careful in choosing fellow workers and so diligent in encouraging cooperation among church members: it's all connected with salvation. These two passages (which form our Sunday reading) offer the theological underpinnings for the advice that Titus is given.

There is a certain parallelism between the passages, and a degree of repetitiousness, but they form a single teaching about salvation that seems to be expressed in four points. First, salvation has come into our midst with Jesus, a salvation directed toward everybody. It is a salvation that involves liberation from sin and the constitution of a new chosen people, characterized by goodness. Second, what Jesus came to bring us is gratuitous. We don't earn it or deserve it. It comes with baptism, through which Jesus gives us the Holy Spirit as a gift, a gift that makes us holy. Third, the salvation that Jesus gives demands certain kinds of behavior: the rejection of deliberate sin and the pursuit of an ordered life in our relationships with ourselves, our neighbor and the Lord. Finally, although we have already received salvation, there is still more to come, a further gift that will be given us when Jesus comes in glory at the end of time and we enter the fullness and finality of life in heaven with him.

It may well be that salvation is the central, fundamental,

basic, all encompassing truth of Christian revelation, the elemental reality that explains everything, the chief energy source that drives all Christian activity and directs it toward its proper end.

Jesus was born to bring salvation to all humanity. He lived, taught, died and rose from the dead to carry out that mission, to enable all of us to share in his life, human and divine. He instituted his Church to continue the offer of salvation to all human beings of all times and places.

If bringing salvation was the fundamental purpose of Jesus' life, accepting salvation and cultivating it in ourselves is the basic purpose of our lives as Christians. Just as everything that Jesus did was directed toward our salvation, so everything we do is supposed to be directed toward accepting that salvation, toward sharing it with others in our world, toward participating in its final, definitive manifestation in the eternal glory of Christ.

Salvation isn't just one more thing in our lives as believers, one more item on the Christian agenda. Salvation is the agenda. Bringing salvation to humankind, offering us a chance to reverse the choices made by our first parents, giving us the opportunity to live the life of God through our sharing in the life of Christ: that's the agenda of salvation; that's the agenda that Christ came to carry out. Our agenda as Catholic Christian believers is also the agenda of salvation, not earning it but accepting it, not giving it (together with other religious values) a high priority but making it the main priority of all. The agenda of salvation is what impels us toward avoiding sin and living a virtuous life, not in order to keep the rules and make God pleased with us, but in order to be consistent with the saving life of Jesus with which we have been gifted. The agenda of salvation involves reaching out to others to share our faith and hope and love with them, not because we feel obliged to do so, but because the life of Christ impels us to do so, because the life and energy of Christ within us make us both saved and saving.

The Baptism of the Lord, straddling both Christmas and

Ordinary Time, reminds us of what the birth and public life of Jesus were all about: salvation. It reminds us of what we are all about, too.

FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

What does salvation mean to me?

How do I respond to it?