

**This Sunday's Readings – Baptism of the Lord** – Last week we celebrated the Feast of the Epiphany. Today we celebrate another epiphany or manifestation of the Son of God – the Baptism of Jesus. For such an important feast, why don't we see it celebrated every year? Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* explains – “In the Eastern Church, the primary emphasis of Epiphany was theological rather than historical: the epiphany of God in the humanity of the incarnate One. Indeed, the whole life of Christ was a series of epiphanies, of which his baptism was the first and most important. The original prominence of the baptismal epiphany was never completely forgotten in the West, but it was relegated to a corner in the liturgy—in the Roman Missal, to the gospel for the octave; in the Book of Common Prayer of 1928, to an office lesson. The revisers of the calendar could hardly have been expected to restore the baptism to its Eastern prominence by putting it on the actual day of Epiphany. The story of the Magi is too popular in Western Christian lore for that. In the present calendar, the baptism is celebrated on the Sunday after January 6 if this Sunday does not coincide with Epiphany; if it does coincide, the baptism is transferred to the Monday after Epiphany. Thus, the feast has regained some prominence, and for this we may be glad. It helps to reinforce the theological, as opposed to the historical, emphasis of our Western Christmas cycle of feasts”.

The first reading is taken from Isaiah (2nd Isaiah, written toward the end of the Babylonian Captivity and is often called the Book of Consolation) and from the first of 4 “Suffering Servant Songs”. A long-standing question has been, just who was the “Suffering Servant”? The Servant is believed to be Jesus, who suffered much to bring salvation to all. This particular section is really in two parts. In the first part, the Lord is addressing us directly by presenting and describing His “chosen one” (Jesus) to us. He will be a person of justice and compassion. In the second part, the Lord is addressing the “chosen one”. He shall bring justice to all, bring all people out of darkness and be a “light for the nations”.

Not only does Matthew quote from these passages but Jesus also does, as He is the fulfillment of these prophecies. Remember that the reason Matthew wrote this gospel was to prove beyond a reasonable doubt the Jesus is the fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies. In other words, Jesus is the long awaited Messiah. In this section, we read about the baptism of Jesus by John. John recognizes Jesus as the chosen one. Again the reference is to the first reading and the fulfillment of the prophecies that Jesus is the Messiah, the chosen one of God. At first John hesitates to baptize Jesus and actually questions Jesus as to why He needs to be baptized. Jesus answers John by saying that it is “to fulfill all righteousness”. From the beginning, Jesus associates Himself with the people that He has been sent to save. John baptizes Jesus and the heavens open up with God the Father saying “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased”. This is the second epiphany or manifestation of the Son of God. This marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. This also marks the end of the liturgical season of Christmas. Tomorrow, Monday, marks the beginning of Ordinary Time.

Reginald H. Fuller in his *Preaching the Lectionary: The Word of God for the Church Today* adds these comments on today's Gospel reading – “Matthew's account of the

baptism differs from that of Mark, which Matthew probably used as his basic source, in two points. First, there is the little dialogue between Jesus and John. Matthew inserted this because in some way he felt that Jesus' baptism at the hands of John created difficulties. It is often thought that Matthew's problem was the sinlessness of Jesus—how could the sinless One submit to a baptism of repentance for the remission of sin? But there is not a trace of concern about Jesus' sinlessness in the narrative. All the stress is on the *persons* of John and Jesus: “I need to be baptized by *you*, and do *you* come to *me*?” As we saw in our discussion of the Johannine prologue (Christmas, Mass During the Day), there was a “baptist” sect which held that John was the bearer of God's final revelation, in competition with the Christian Church. This made the story of Jesus' baptism (whose historicity, for that very reason, is beyond all reasonable doubt) embarrassing for Christians. It would seem that by submitting to John's baptism, Jesus tacitly admitted John's superiority to himself, and therefore sided with the “baptists” against the Christians. Matthew explains Jesus' submission to John's baptism by inserting this little dialogue, in which Jesus gives the reason: “thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” This word recalls that of Isaiah 42:6 in the first reading: “I have called you in righteousness,” that is, in order to fulfill my purpose in salvation history. Thus, Jesus' reply to John underlines the servant Christology of the baptism narrative. Jesus' submission to John's baptism was part of God's plan, so that Jesus would be manifested as the servant of YHWH, now about to embark upon his mission. Matthew's second change is in the wording of the voice from heaven. Mark has: “Thou art my beloved Son,” thus making it a direct address to Jesus only. This suggests that originally the baptism was pictured as a personal experience of Jesus—his call from God to begin his mission. Mark may already have intended this, for by including it in his Gospel he wants to explain to the reader who Jesus is, not as part of Jesus' biography. But Matthew wants to make it quite clear that the baptism is rather an epiphany declaring to the Church the true identity of Jesus: he is the servant of YHWH, fulfilling in his person the mission of the servant as depicted in Second Isaiah”.

John J. Pilch in his *The Cultural World of Jesus, Sunday by Sunday, Cycle C* adds these comments on Jesus' baptism – “One of the most certain historical facts recorded in the gospels is that John baptized Jesus. Each Gospel, however, presents a different significance or interpretation of this fact.

#### SEASONS

In first-century Israel there were two seasons: rainy (from late September to late April) and dry (early May to early September). During the rainy season people stayed indoors. During the dry season, people could be out and about, a very important Mediterranean activity. People there love to see and be seen. In this regard, Jesus and his disciples were typical Mediterraneans. That Jesus and others could be “dipped” in the Jordan indicates it was the beginning of the dry season, when the Jordan and its streams would have been filled with the winter rains and the sun had warmed the shallow waters to a comfortable temperature. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus' ministry lasts one dry season. He dies at Passover, a harvest feast celebrated at the beginning of the next dry season. In John's Gospel, Jesus' ministry covers a period of three dry seasons because he makes three trips to Jerusalem to observe the springtime feast of Passover.

## JESUS' IDENTITY

In Matthew, the voice from heaven announces: "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." Hasn't the evangelist already made this point in the first two chapters of his Gospel? Remember that in this honor-driven society, one must establish that value at every opportunity. ... .. In the baptism, a public event witnessed by everyone pre-sent, God personally proclaims a relationship of father and son, patron and client, with Jesus. Without this public declaration, Jesus would have been unable to initiate his ministry. Even so, Jesus' hometown neighbors remained skeptical: "Is this not the carpenter's son? . . . Where did he get all of this?" ([Matthew 13:54-58](#)).

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DIPPING

From the earliest times, the followers of Jesus were embarrassed by his submission to John's baptism. John, after all, explained that his baptism was for the purpose of repentance ([Matthew 3:11](#)). Being superior to John (Matthew 3:11-12), Jesus did not need to repent. Matthew's account offers two explanations to ease the embarrassment. One is common to all three accounts of Jesus' baptism, namely, the voice from heaven. In the Hebrew Scripture, this voice is called the "daughter of the voice" (*bat qol*), that is, the "echo" of something God has spoken. ... .. The voice from heaven in Matthew says that Jesus is baptized because God wills it. God is pleased by Jesus' obedience, which in turn suggests that Jesus deserves obedience from his followers. The second explanation which is peculiar to Matthew's Gospel is Jesus' claim that he must "fulfill all righteousness." Scholars understand this to mean that, like many people, Jesus was intrigued by John's reputation and went out to see him. Then John's exhortation to repentance caused a change of heart in him, a conversion. Jesus was an artisan. While there is no evidence to indicate that he ever cheated clients, he recognized the risks entailed in his profession and accepted John's call to "produce good fruits." Jesus was baptized in order to please God. As a result, he became John's disciple and shared in the dipping ministry. (See [John 3:22](#) which reports Jesus' baptizing ministry, and contrast [John 4:1-2](#), the later Christian tradition, which denies it.) How refreshing for American believers to realize that Jesus, too, had to discover his identity, discern God's will for him, and pursue his destiny. Jesus' beliefs helped him. How do our beliefs help us?"

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For the expanded article, go to <http://stjulies.org/A Archive READINGS.htm>