

The Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Mt 3:13-17

In the conversation between God and His creation, God always takes the initiative. In our first reading, the true Servant of God is the one who is called by Him and who is filled by His Holy Spirit. It isn't clear whether the Servant is all of God's people Israel, a righteous remnant of Israel, or an individual who is the Messiah. The passage does not speak of 'a' Servant but 'the servant.' However, this figure portrays what God's servant, disciple or Church, is expected to be like. The Servant's mission is a universal one to Jews and Gentiles alike. The Servant is not a tyrannical leader but one who is prepared to suffer for, because of and with, God's people. The servant is one who displays perfect trust in, and obedience to God, who in return will honour his promise to uphold and defend him.

It is easy to see why the Church considers Jesus to be **the** chosen Servant, the Messiah. He took the initiative to be baptised by John the Baptist, identifying Himself with God's people Israel. John had been warning the people that one who was more powerful than him was coming. This man would destroy the enemies of God with the Spirit of fire. John had separated the wheat from the chaff which was scattered over the threshing floor, but the coming one would heap the chaff and wheat into piles, one to be destroyed and the other to be placed in God's granary.

When Jesus presented Himself to be baptised, John inwardly knew who He was, and protests. It is easy to see why. How could the one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit receive the water baptism of those who are called to repent?

St Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism differs in some ways from that of St Mark. Matthew doesn't link the forgiveness of sins to John the Baptist's baptism. That comes through Jesus' death. John's baptism is a *call* to repentance. Only Matthew says that John feels unworthy to baptise Jesus, but Jesus commands him to 'leave it as it is' - to 'let it be' - for the moment, implying that the baptism of the Spirit is not yet. John's mission was to make God's people pass through the waters as they had done when they crossed the Red Sea on their way to the Promised Land. Crossing that sea was the point of no return. So was John's baptism with its call for repentance as they journeyed towards God's promised salvation.

Jesus is baptised because He is faithful to God as one of the people of Israel. Jesus does not discuss whether He or John has a greater role because both of them must do what is right. Righteousness is doing that which is pleasing to God. It is living in accord with God's will. The first words Matthew records Jesus speaking are words to John the Baptist, "It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

By being baptised Jesus demonstrates that He will do what God requires. God's response is to overshadow Jesus with the Holy Spirit and announce, "This is my beloved Son, on whom my favour rests" or, "in whom I am well pleased." In Matthew's account, the ones who are intended to hear this heavenly voice was not the crowd – that had dispersed. It wasn't John

the Baptist because he already knew who Jesus was. It is those who read Matthew's gospel which includes each one of us.

Here in the baptism of Jesus we have the clear affirmation of Jesus' identity. The prayer of the prophet Isaiah that God would tear open the heavens and come down (Is 64:1), has been answered with Jesus' birth and underlined in His baptism. Matthew describes what we now see as the Trinity, the Father's voice, the obedience of the Son, and the empowering love of the Holy Spirit. The God who has torn open the heavens and come down will now, as Isaiah said, "do awesome deeds that we do not expect" (Is 64:3).

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, God's Messiah and Servant, who has not only told us, but has shown us how to follow God's will and warned us of the cost of doing so. The Pharisees and Sadducees who witnessed this are not the only ones who refuse to follow Jesus. There are plenty of others like them. Are we one of that group, or will we be like the first disciples who left their nets immediately to follow Him.

That is the question we each have to answer for ourselves. Who do we worship? God or ourselves?

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January 11th, 2026