

Sermon for The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord  
St. Paul's Cathedral, London, ON  
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Loving God, who at the baptism of your blessed Son Jesus Christ in the River Jordan, revealed the glory of his divine nature: let the light of his presence so shine in our hearts and in our words, and his glory be shown forth in all our lives, through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

What we are experiencing in this morning's service is nothing less than the manifestation of God! At the beginning of every new year we find ourselves in the liturgical season of Epiphany. This season sets the stage for a year-long journey centred on the life of Jesus Christ. Why do we begin our journey of Christ's life with Epiphany? Well, it defines for us who Jesus is and why it is imperative for us to worship him as part of the divine Trinity.

The word Epiphany is Greek for "manifestation" or "showing forth". There are several manifestations of Jesus' divinity which are shown to us in this season: the adoration of the Magi; Jesus first miracle at the wedding at Cana; the beginning of Jesus ministry with his reading of the text "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me"; and perhaps most importantly, the major feast which we celebrate today "The Baptism of the Lord." Jesus' baptism affirmed his identity as God's Son. It inaugurated his public ministry in a way that identified with all the people. He allied himself with all the broken and hurting people who had flocked to the Jordan River. With his baptism Jesus openly and decisively declared that he stands shoulder to shoulder with us in all our fears and anxieties.

He intentionally takes sides with people in their neediness, and declares that God is biased in their favour. God's abundant mercy, Jesus declared, was available directly and immediately to every person.

Still wet with water at his baptism Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision - the declaration of God the Father that Jesus was his beloved Son, and the descent of God the Spirit in the form of a dove. They signaled the meaning, the Epiphany that Jesus' mission was to be a divine mission.

The primary meaning is clear: the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus and Jesus was declared to be the Son of God by none other than God. Jesus Christ is designated the Son of God by God. There is no wiggle room as to the true identity of Jesus. The coming of the Holy Spirit is not to make Jesus the Son of God - Luke affirmed that in the birth story - but to empower the Servant for his task. The descent of the Holy Spirit was an anointing for public ministry.

Now let's look at our own baptism in the Church. What does it mean for those of us who are baptized, or who may be considering baptism. What does it mean for Tim who, as an adult, will intentionally take on the vows of baptism for himself on this special day?

Baptism unites Christ with his people. Christians are baptized one-by-one, but in baptism we become a new creation, a new humanity. We become the Church. Christian baptism administered by water in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is a bond with God which is considered indissoluble. As we are anointed with holy oil in the name of Christ, the anointed, the baptism of each Christian is related to the baptism of Christ. The celebrant then prays that those who have been made new in baptism may display the gifts of the Spirit in their own lives.

In the promises made during baptism we make a covenant or agreement with God to be his people. The covenant is an active one which holds true not only today but throughout our lives. The covenant defines how we may display the gifts of the Spirit in our lives. We are asked "will you continue?", "will you persevere?", "will you proclaim?", "will you seek and serve Christ?", "will you strive for justice and

peace?”. It is the living out of these covenantal promises which aids in strengthening us spiritually as Christians and as the Church. We come to baptism not to be stronger individuals but to become a stronger Church.

Our own World Wide Anglican Communion has been beset in recent years by disputes over our theological, biblical and ethical positions on what we hold to be vital views as members of the Church. A design group of the World Wide Anglican Communion has recently drawn up a Covenant to be presented for approval which indicates how membership within the Covenant would be lived out. I mention this this morning because the introduction to that Covenant is strongly rooted in our baptismal covenant. That is, our baptismal covenant defines who we are as a church and how we should interact with one another. The introduction to that covenant begins by stating “God has called us into communion in Jesus Christ, a communion revealed to us by the Son as being the very divine life of God” and “our divine calling into communion is established in God’s purposes for the whole of creation.” The document goes on to state that there are responsibilities for our common life before God including “faithfulness, honesty, gentleness, humility, patience, forgiveness and love itself, lived out in mutual deference and service.”

This says that our baptismal covenant with God defines who we are as Christians and as a Church. Just as Jesus’ baptism affirmed his identity as God’s Son, so our baptism affirms our identity as children of God. Jesus’ baptism prepared him for the trials and tribulations that were to come. Our baptism prepares us for the trials and tribulations that we will surely face in this life. Jesus’ baptism prepared him for his public ministry. Our baptism prepares us to fulfill our calling in ministry. It is not ordination that acknowledges that each of us has a ministry or a calling to fulfill, but baptism. Every baptized believer is called to minister to others in Jesus’ name. These responsibilities are clearly part of the Sacrament of Baptism which is being celebrated today.

So what is the spiritual core of this teaching on Holy Baptism? How are we to put it into practice, and in so doing, how can we be changed spiritually to become a Church which is truly “Christ-like”?

Our first promise is “to continue”. We are spiritually strengthened when we continue in worship, in prayer, in the teachings of the Church and in Christian fellowship. We are strengthened each time we receive Christ in the Holy Eucharist. All of these faithful practices of worship are spiritual experiences which nurture us together with those who worship with us.

“Will we persevere?” Will we persevere in resisting evil and whenever we fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord? We are to know the difference between good and evil, right and wrong, and to know our need to say we are sorry and turn again and again to Christ. So doing will keep us on the right spiritual track of life, firmly grounded in Christ and in his way.

“Will we proclaim?” Will we proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ? In other words, by the way we live our lives, by what we say and what we do, will Christ be evident to others and will we have the conviction to speak of the positive difference Christ has made in our lives?

“Will we seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbour as ourselves?” Will you care as much about other people as we do about ourselves? Will our life be a life of service to others in small deeds and in large? Will we strive to make a positive difference?

And, “will we strive for justice and peace among all people and respect the dignity of every human being?” Will we be peace-makers, and will we insist on justice in any given issue? Will we point out the wrong and seek to right it? Will the dignity of every human being be as important to us as our own?

These are the big questions which are asked of us in our baptism. Of course, in order to know Christ and God's will for us, we must be taught within the body of the Church, by regular worship and instruction in the faith.

Our baptism into Jesus Christ, our acceptance of his healing love and our desire to be as he was, begins our ministry. A ministry in which we are called to do as he did, and identify with those who are lost and those who cry out for wholeness. If we proclaim the word that Jesus has given us, if we heed the cry of those around us, if we take notice of the signs that God sends us, learn the lessons that they teach and walk as Jesus walked with one another as friends, as helpers, as people able and willing to share the love of the Lord who is in us, then the world will be able to see a true manifestation of God in Jesus Christ. The Baptism of Jesus is a manifestation of the divine. Our baptism lived out in the reflection of the light of Christ can be a true manifestation of Christ's presence in today's world.

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, grant renewal to us your people,  
and grant renewal to your whole Church:  
renewal of love for you and for one another;  
renewal of faith in your promises and in the power of the gospel;  
renewal of vision for the work of your kingdom throughout the world.  
Renew our lives, O Christ, after your own image.  
Renew us by your indwelling Holy Spirit,  
and make us strong for service and witness  
in your name and for your glory. AMEN.