

10 January 2021: The First Sunday after the Epiphany: Mark 1:7-11

John the Baptist proclaimed, *I baptized you with water; but (he)...will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*

John's baptism was *for repentance*—a token of turning from sin, turning to God. Jesus was baptized so that his identification with sinners is complete. CS Lewis wrote that there are no depths to which God will not sink for us. Jesus took our humanity on himself; on the cross he went to the place of annihilation—our greatest fear; at his baptism he went to the place of our greatest burden—our rebellion against God's desires for us and the world. At every point Jesus meets us not "from above" but always in humanity so that human beings through him may be eternally united to God.

Jesus does not come to give something to us, but to unite us to himself and the Father. In Jesus, baptism itself is changed. John's baptism is part of the old covenant. Jesus inaugurates the Sacrament of Baptism: *He will baptize you with Holy Spirit*, and here is the key to understanding Christian Baptism.

The Prayer Book Catechism teaches: *a sacrament is an outward, visible sign of an inward, spiritual grace.* Obviously, the outward sign is water, signifying washing, death, nurture, and immersion. Unfortunately, the Church has not yet fully recovered the strong symbol of immersion, but I believe we will—perhaps even in my lifetime. It is the more ancient way of baptizing people, more vigorously symbolic of its meaning and purpose. In Baptism, we are immersed in God—saturated, soaked with God's divine life.

The baptismal water soaks into every pore of our bodies, we cannot distinguish where our body ends, and the water begins. In Baptism we are so united with God that our mortality and God's divinity are intertwined and inseparable. And we are to remain 'wet'; that is, while we eventually rise from the physical water of Baptism, we will always be united to God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel Jesus says: *out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water...* Baptism does not end with the last drop of water. Baptism is a beginning: through the Sacrament, we become Sacraments—outward, visible signs of God's inward, spiritual grace poured out for the world's salvation.

Therefore, the 'signs' of Baptism are not just those we see at the font. The outward, visible signs of Baptism well up in and out of us. Here are just three.

Praying in the Spirit: I do not mean speaking in tongues. All prayer is Spirit-filled. In Romans Paul writes: *...when we cry 'Abba, Father' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are God's children* (Romans 8:15-16); and *...the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought...* Prayer—whether grand or humble, articulate or stumbling—is an outward, visible sign of God's love for the world. Some advice on prayer: CS Lewis wrote that the less one prays the worse it goes. As with anything, we learn by doing; so, do it. Also pay no attention to feelings, consolations, results, or anything else. Just pray; pray often. Next, ask the Holy Spirit to teach you to pray. Prayer takes your commitment and God's help: *...how much more will God give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.* (Luke 11:13)

A second outward, visible sign of Baptism is transformed relationships. Our faith thrives or withers in the real, challenging relationships with—well, everyone. The Spirit teaches us how and strengthens us to live for Christ through our triumphs and failures with others. This is where Jesus is and is to be found, in the middle of life, not outside it; this is where we are most effective as Jesus-followers.

Baptism begins with words from Ephesians, but the context is missing (pg 299). *Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one Body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one Faith, one Baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.* (Ephesians 4 1-6)

A third outward, visible sign of Baptism is ordinary-extraordinary commitment. What is considered extraordinary to those outside, is ordinary in the Church. A commitment that anchors one's life, defines all other commitments; informs actions, thoughts, and words; the deep desire to live for God's glory. It is commitment to God, one another, the world, and oneself, with thanksgiving for the past and expectancy of what God will do, lived actively in the present.

Jesus baptizes with Holy Spirit: let the waters roll; let the Holy Spirit be poured out in us, around and through us. Holy God make us outward, visible signs of your salvation for all.

Blessing and honor, thanksgiving and praise, more than we can offer, more than we can conceive, be yours, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, by all angels, all mortals, all creatures, for ever and ever. Amen.