

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS (Mk 1:7-11)

Sometimes children can be an embarrassment to their parents although I'm sure that none of us here was. Take the case of John the Baptist. John was the son of Zechariah who was one of the priests in the Jewish religion. One of the main jobs of the priests was to offer sacrifice to God for the people for the forgiveness of their sins. People would buy animals and the priests would slaughter the animals, thereby offering to God a sacrifice for the wrongs they had done. It is estimated that 75-80% of the economy of Jerusalem at the time was derived from the raising, feeding, storing, and buying of animals. That was an awful lot of buying and selling of animals just to kill them to appease God. The priests were the only ones who could offer sacrifice to God. So when John came offering forgiveness of sins from God, I guess you could say that John was following in his father's footsteps, except that in John's way of doing it, forgiveness of sins was essentially **free!** All that they had to do was to repent, to change their lives, and to have water poured over them in order to be forgiven. And the people were flocking to him by the hundreds. John was transforming a sacred rite that had been part of the Jewish religion for hundreds of years, since the time of Abraham. How embarrassing to the hierarchy that one of their own would undermine their authority and their livelihood. There goes the neighborhood and the economy of Jerusalem. This was totally radical!

And now **Jesus** steps into the waters of the Jordan River and asks John to baptize him, thereby giving added credibility to what John was doing. In one of the other gospels we hear John saying to Jesus, "Wait a minute; you should be baptizing me." But Jesus replies that it must be this way. Jesus is showing us "the way" to salvation; he is uniting himself with all of humanity so that when he says, "Follow me" we will know that **he** underwent everything which the Father asks of **us**. Jesus is showing us his submission to his Father, and the Father in return displays his affection for his Son when the heavens are torn open and the voice says, "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased." **Jesus** didn't need to hear the voice, but **we** need to hear the voice because of our doubts during times of trial and temptation. Immediately after Jesus' baptism he is led into the desert by the Spirit to be tempted and to show us how to overcome the enticements of power, prestige and position. Don't think that it was easy for Jesus to resist those temptations, for he was fully human and would have desired all of the things which the devil was promising him. Jesus used the power of scripture to overcome the worldly temptations which he faced not only in the desert, but throughout his ministerial life. For example, when he was curing all of the people from their diseases and illnesses, they wanted to make him king, but

he refused. When he fed the 5,000 and the 7,000 he did it because of his concern for the people and for the glory of God, and he refused the adulation. When he was nailed to the cross and tempted to call on legions of angels to save him, he refused. And Jesus' way of life started with his baptism by John in the Jordan.

Jesus' way is our way. Whenever we are faced with temptations, we only need to ask Jesus for his help in overcoming them and the thoughts will be released from our minds. He knows how hard it is to resist, and he has concern and pity for us in our time of trial. But asking for his help just once or twice isn't enough; our asking needs to become part of our daily life because evil and worldly desires are part of our everyday life. But, so, too, is the love of God and eternal life a part of our daily lives. To take just a simple example, one of my pet peeves is another driver who cuts in front of me. It's amazing how quickly the thoughts of violence and revenge can enter my mind and my heart over such a small thing. And if I truly think about it, the other driver probably is oblivious of what they are doing for any number of reasons. Honking my horn or yelling in the confines of my car or indicating what I think their IQ level is hasn't seemed to change their behavior over all of these years. So a couple of years ago I asked Jesus to show me a better way, and I started blessing them instead of thinking evil of them. But I noticed that that didn't always work --- but what else could I do? I could keep on doing it, over and over. And I even have a conscience sitting beside me, Mary my wife, to remind me of what to do when I resort to my previous behavior. I have noticed that over time I don't get so upset about it. Instead, I slow down and let them in, and my heart rate and my blood pressure while driving has gone down a great deal, and I am not a contributor to the sense of "road rage," that angry spirit, on our streets and highways. The blessing that I give to others has changed, not them, but **me!**

That's just a simple example of how I am working to become more a person of peace as Jesus was. And it works the same way for other temptations which entice us --- greed for money or food, lust for power or sexual promiscuity, jealousy and envy, pride and self-gratification. Just ask Jesus to remove the thoughts from your mind and heart, and he will do it. I have to add this caveat, though. It isn't always easy and doesn't always work, not because of Jesus, but either because I don't believe that he will do it or I am enjoying those thoughts going through my mind and I don't want to give them up. I am called to cooperate with Jesus in transforming my thoughts by changing what I am doing, looking at, or desiring. To repent doesn't mean to just be sorry for the wrongs I have done, but it means that I transform myself by changing myself internally. There was a man who for many years had been attracted to the teachings of Jesus Christ but had never been baptized. When asked why, he replied, "It's like getting on a train and asking the conductor, 'How much?'"

Then hearing the conductor reply, 'Your life,' the thought of bearing that much responsibility frightened me. So I went and hid in the caboose where I've been hiding ever since."

The thought of giving our lives over to God and changing may frighten many of us. But Jesus is with us every step of our lives, guiding us, giving us strength, and picking us up when we fall. We are not alone on this train; we have the Son of God as our conductor.

Jesus transformed the nature of baptism from forgiveness of sins to becoming a child of God. By our baptism we are called to transform our lives with the help of our Lord Jesus Christ. This transformation is an everyday thing for us. Admittedly, some days are better than others; it's a constant journey of two steps forward and one step back because, after all, we are still human trying to let our divine nature shine forth more and more. Forgiveness of sins is free, given to us by God, God saying to us, "**You** are my **beloved** child in whom I am well pleased."

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