

Baptism of Our Lord, Series A
Matthew 3:13-17
January 13, 2007

Well, we've made it through the Christmas Season, which is the celebration of the deep mystery of the Second Person of the blessed Holy Trinity assuming human flesh, and being born into our world as Jesus of Nazareth. This is an extremely important article of the Christian faith, yet the humanity of Jesus has often been a stumbling block, even among Christians. If we're honest with ourselves, we really want Jesus to be a "super baby" and not just a regular, normal, human infant like the ones who come to our church. What's a "super baby?" It's one that never whines, never cries, never throws up, never messes his pants, never disappoints his parents and always sits perfectly through the entire worship service in the synagogue! Then we want baby Jesus to grow up to be a super child, not just a child. Then we want Him to grow up to be a super man and not just a man. And pretty soon, we want Him to be a super god who has the magic wand of a fairy godmother and gives us three wishes! But that's not the true God of the Sacred Scriptures.

What I've been describing is the heresy of "Docetism." That is, we don't allow Jesus to be fully human. Bone of our bone. Flesh of our flesh. Emotion of our emotion. Skin of our skin. The Incarnation has some profound implications that we seldom think about. For example, when the Second Person of the Holy Trinity became man, He voluntarily accepted the limitations of natural humanity and subjected Himself to living within certain constraints. We are reminded of this every year on Palm/Passion Sunday when we hear St. Paul say that Jesus *"made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!"* (Phil 2:7-9) I like the way Eugene Peterson (The Message) translates it: *"When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn't claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion."*

What does this mean? Although Jesus always remained fully and essentially God, He lays aside certain attributes associated with His glory. The Catechism refers to this as Jesus' "state of humiliation." It describes how Jesus operated during His time on earth 2000 years ago. So, flash back to that baby in the manger on Christmas. At one time the Second Person of the Trinity could be everywhere at once, but now He is restricted to a human frame that can only be in one place at a time. Jesus is in swaddling cloths and lying in the manger in Bethlehem and that's the only place He is. He is subject to the laws of physics and is constrained by the necessities of human biology. He is tired. He is hungry. He is hot. He is cold. He sweats. He feels joy and pain. He bleeds real blood. Two weeks ago, St. Matthew told us how King Herod was out to kill Jesus and how St. Joseph gets a dream to leave town because Jesus is not a "super baby" that could get out of the crib and leap tall buildings in a single bound and defend Himself. Jesus, truly God, is a real baby who lays there, helpless, and does nothing but what babies do.

The next thing we notice is that the Second Person of the Holy Trinity sets aside His omniscience when He becomes human. Jesus of Nazareth wasn't all knowing. As a twelve year old boy in the temple, He was unaware of His parents concern that He was not in the crowd returning from the feast of the Passover. St. Luke reminds us that Jesus *"grew in wisdom,"*

implying that His wisdom has been limited. During His public ministry, when the woman with the issue of blood was healed, Jesus asked crowd who had touched Him and He kept looking around to see who it was who had done it. Jesus asks the father of the epileptic boy, “*What are you arguing with them (the disciples) about?*” (Mk 9:16) and then “*How long has he been like this?*” (Mk 9:21) When asked about His own return to establish the Kingdom on earth, Jesus replied, “*No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.*” (Mk 13:32). So, then Jesus operated within the constraints of human knowing. He couldn’t solve quadratic equations. He couldn’t speak French. He couldn’t explain the infield fly rule and He knew nothing of the three point shot or the 20 second play clock. He wouldn’t have lasted long on “Are You Smarter than a 5th Grader?”

I think the most shocking discovery we make is that when God incarnates, He lays aside His power. Jesus said, “*I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing...*” (Jn 5:19) St. John uses the Greek word “*ou*” here, which is translated “nothing” and has a unique, technical/theological meaning. It means “NOTHING.” Just like in English! Let that sink in for a minute. On His own, Jesus couldn’t heal the sick. He couldn’t deliver the tormented from demons or raise the dead. His early life history bears this out. We don’t have any canonical accounts of Jesus doing anything extraordinary until He’s thirty years old. Why is that? Because “nothing” means “NOTHING.” Scripture tells us that while Jesus lived in Nazareth, no one had any idea that He was God come in the flesh. Even the Virgin Mary had only an inkling based on thirty-year-old visions and prophetic words. There’s nothing worth writing home about until after Jesus’ baptism.

If you’re not scandalized by now, you’re just not listening! Do you see why the Incarnation has been such a stumbling block for so many? Is there a way to make sense of this? I’ve been trying to think up a good analogy. Unfortunately, this is the best I can do. When I was an Army war planner in Europe, we operated under a certain set of constraints called “rules of engagement.” There were certain things we could do and other things that were not allowed. In our arsenal we have weapons of mass destruction—nuclear, biological, and chemical warheads. Now, I couldn’t just decide that I wanted to rubble a city with a nuke, or drop some nerve gas over there, or send small pox ridden blankets to the Indians. We have a set of operating protocols that dictate when and how weapons of mass destruction may be used. For example, the US government has stated that we will use chemical weapons only as a retaliatory strike in kind. In other words, if somebody gasses us, we’ll hit them back with some of our own stuff. We have also declared that we reserve the right to a “first strike” with our nuclear weapons. If things get to a certain point, we’ll shoot first and we’ll use the big stick. It’s part of our deterrent capability. Finally, for many years now, our government has taken the position that we will not, under any circumstances, deploy biological weapons.

So, then, just like our government, which has made a conscious decision to renounce the use of biological weapons, so also Jesus chooses not to operate out of the fullness of His divinity while on earth, but to really and truly live the human life just like we do. Why is this so important? Because of His mission. Jesus comes to recover what Adam had lost, but He has to reclaim it in the same way it was lost—as a man. What Adam, a man without original sin, lost could only be reclaimed by Jesus, truly a man, also without original sin, and it had to be done without “cheating” in order to be valid. Which brings us to today’s Gospel and the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry to get on with the job.

Up to this point He has already lived a perfect human life that He could give us credit for.

Now all He has to do is finish the job that would end with His death, His Resurrection, and His Ascension. Why start in this way? Why did Jesus get baptized? He said it had to be done “*to fulfill all righteousness.*” St. Matthew writes: “*As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’*” The sky opened up and heaven’s glory was seen. We’re not just talking a break in the clouds. We’re talking glory and majesty shining down from heaven itself. It was spectacular display, but what’s the significance? What’s going on here?

For thirty years, Jesus has done nothing out of the ordinary, but immediately following His baptism, Jesus begins a highly controversial and very public ministry accompanied by extraordinary manifestations of power. He begins proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom and demonstrating it’s presence among the people through signs and wonders. Serving God quietly as a carpenter in Nazareth is a thing of the past. What’s changed? How can He go from zero (living in obscurity and working as a carpenter) to Mach 2 (proclaiming “*the Kingdom of Heaven has come near!*” and healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead) so quickly?

The answer is plain enough: “*He received the power of the Holy Spirit.*” All of the Gospels relate how John the Baptizer saw the Holy Spirit descend and remain on Jesus. Yes, the Holy Spirit was in Jesus from the beginning of His life on earth (“*he was conceived by Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary...*”), long before John the Baptizer saw the Spirit in the form of a dove come down upon Him. Yes, He was fully God from all eternity. But, nevertheless, following His baptism, the Holy Spirit began to be manifested through Jesus with new power and we finally get the Jesus that everyone has been hankering for!

Just a few examples. This guy can discern spirits! “*Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.’*” (Mt 16:16-17) He operates in the word of knowledge. “*Go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.*” (Mt 17:27) In preparation for the triumphal entry, Jesus knew about the donkey tied up in the next village with her colt beside her and He knew what the owner’s response would be. In preparation for the Passover, Jesus knew that the disciples that He sent would meet a man carrying a jar of water, who they were to follow and ask the owner of the house he entered for the use of his guest room. They found things just as Jesus had told them.

Jesus has words of wisdom for the situations when His enemies are trying to trap Him. For example, when He faces a political issue (“*Should we pay taxes to Caesar? Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.*”), a legal issue (*the Pharisees said to him, “Look, why are they doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? Then he said to them, “The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*), and a moral issue (the woman caught in adultery and Jesus says “*If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.*”) to name just a few.

After His baptism, Jesus begins flowing in the healing ministry and doing miracles. “*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed*

them.” (Mt 4:23) He walked on water, stilled a storm, changed water into wine, fed multitudes out of minimal supplies, cursed a fig tree and helped catch fish.

Now, we could go on and on, but here’s the point: Jesus does these things without reaching into His own “back pocket” so to speak by dipping into His divinity. He does miracles, signs, and wonders as the man, Jesus of Nazareth, in right relationship to God, completely dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit working through Him. Today’s Gospel shows us how Jesus was baptized in the Holy Spirit and how He then, and only then, moved out into ministry. That’s our model and the call/promise of our own Holy Baptism.

The Catechism says that in Baptism, we receive forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil, and eternal salvation. Dr. Luther calls Baptism “a gracious water of life and a washing of regeneration in the Holy Spirit”-- the very same Holy Spirit who descended upon Jesus in the Jordan. In your Baptism, the Holy Spirit enters you through the water and the Word and becomes one with you. Jesus said that we too would “*receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you.*” (Acts 1:8) In our Baptism, we have received power to live holy lives, to witness, to pray, to understand scripture, to minister to others. According to St. Paul, each of us has received certain “gifts” from God. Some have gifts of healing, some wisdom, or faith, of words of knowledge, or miracles. Some here have the discerning of Spirits and others of you have the gift of prophecy. Perhaps a few of you have the gift of tongues or the interpretation of tongues.

The point is that these gifts are for the benefit of the whole Church and are specifically available to every believer as the Holy Spirit wills. We should expect them to manifest in your life and ministry, just like they did for Jesus. He did no ministry apart from what He saw His Father doing. If Jesus, who had no sin to separate Him from the Father, was completely dependent on the power of the Holy Spirit, how much more ought we to be? We are sinners cleansed by the blood of Jesus. In our baptism we are made new creations in Him. Through Jesus’ sacrifice He has dealt with the power and effect of sin for all who believe. You are forgiven, renewed, and refreshed. Nothing now separates you from the Father either. The only unsettled issue is this: How dependent on the Holy Spirit are you willing to be? Amen.