

The Baptism of the Lord

(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7
<i>Response</i>	The Lord will bless his people with peace. O bless the Lord, my soul.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	Acts 10:34-38
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The heavens were opened and the voice of the Father thundered: This is my beloved Son, listen to him.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Every year the Church brings the Christmas season to an end and begins Ordinary Time with this kind of transitional feast of the Baptism of the Lord. It is a very important feast because in Ordinary Time we're going to be studying the public ministry of Jesus, and Jesus' public ministry is inaugurated, of course, with his baptism by John the Baptist in the waters of the river Jordan. So the readings for the Baptism of the Lord, Year C, give us the same Old Testament readings each year, but the gospel reading is different. This year it's going to focus on, of course, the Gospel of Luke, which is the gospel that Year C is taking us through. So let's look at the gospel reading for today from Luke 3:15 and following, and we'll focus on the account of the Baptism of Jesus and then go back to the Old Testament and tie the two together. So Luke 3:15 says this:

As the people were in expectation, and all men questioned in their hearts concerning John, whether perhaps he were the Christ, John answered them all, "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

And then it skips down to verse 21, which says this:

Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, as a dove, and a voice came from heaven, "Thou art my beloved Son; with thee I am well pleased."

A number of elements of this account of Jesus' baptism are worth highlighting. First is just the popularity of John the Baptist. Sometimes we can kind of forget how important a figure John was in early Judaism, because we think of him as just the forerunner, but the reality of the fact is that if you look at Josephus, the First Century Jewish historian, he actually gives more time to John the Baptist in his account of the history of the Jews in the First Century than he does to Jesus because John was a very popular figure. He was so popular that many Jews thought he himself might be the Christ, and when it says the Christ there the Greek word is *christos*, *ho Christos* technically, the anointed one or the Messiah. So there's this expectation going around that maybe John is the guy, maybe this is the one we've been waiting for, maybe he's the long-awaited King of Israel, the Savior, the Redeemer, the Messiah.

So John responds to this rumor that's going around, this question people are asking, by giving a kind of a riddle and a prophecy of this mysterious coming one, the one who is to come. Notice, he doesn't say the Messiah, he just says the one who is to come. This is how he describes him, he says, "I'm baptizing you with water, but the one mightier than I is coming, and I'm not worthy to even untie the thong of his sandals." So pause there. What is John emphasizing there? First, he's emphasizing the strength of the future figure. "You think I'm something, the one coming after me is far more powerful." Second, he's emphasizing the glory of the one who is to come. When John says, "I'm not worthy to untie his sandals," he's pointing to the role that would've been played by a servant or a slave. When the master would come home from a long journey, the servant would untie his sandals and wash his feet, right. If you remember in the Gospel of John, the disciples recoil when Jesus starts to wash their feet because he's taken the roll of a slave. So what John is saying is I'm not even worthy to be his slave, so don't confuse me with him. And then the third thing that is interesting is John contrasts his baptism with the baptism of

the coming one, of the Messiah. He says, you know, "I baptize you with water, but he's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

Now, in the context of Luke and his gospel, which remember is the first volume of the two-volume work, Luke and Acts of the Apostles, John's words here are particularly potent, because they point forward to what Jesus himself is going to say at the beginning of the Book of Acts. If you remember in Acts 1, Jesus tells the disciples to stay in the city of Jerusalem, right, and that they are going to be baptized with the Holy Spirit. And sure enough, they stay in Jerusalem, and on the day of Pentecost the spirit comes down upon them in tongues as of fire. So it's really only in Luke's gospel that we get an answer to the question of what John means by being baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire. He's talking about the descent of the Holy Spirit that will come down upon the apostles. Now, does he know exactly how that's all going to play out with Pentecost and what not? Not necessarily, but Luke certainly knows it because he's the author of the Gospel and Acts, and so this acts as a kind of parallel between the beginning of Luke and the beginning of Acts here.

So Jesus is going to do something more than John. John, don't get me wrong, his baptism is really important, it's a baptism of repentance. It's an outward sign of the repentant hearts of the people, right, for the forgiveness of sins. But Jesus is going to do something more, the Messiah is going to do something more. He's actually going to give the gift of the Holy Spirit. He's going to pour out the Holy Spirit upon his people so that the Spirit itself will dwell within them, it will come upon them in tongues as of fire. And in that, the prophecy of Jeremiah 31 will be fulfilled, where God says, "I will write my law in their hearts," or Ezekiel 36, where the prophet Ezekiel said that "I will put a new heart and a new spirit within them." John here is anticipating the gift of the Holy Spirit through the baptism of the Holy Spirit that takes place at Pentecost. I just highlight this, because if you recall, or as you will see too, the Gospel of Luke is very focused on the Holy Spirit. Some people even call it the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. So we have already at the very beginning in the account of Jesus' baptism and John's words, the prominence and the centrality of baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire. That's what the Messiah's going to do and that's one of the reasons he's greater than John.

Alright, so that's the prelude then, what about the actual account of Jesus' baptism itself? Well, if you look at Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus, one thing you'll notice is that it's pretty brief, it's kind of short. He actually doesn't really describe the baptism, he just mentions it in passing: when Jesus had been baptized. He kind of pushes right through that and focuses on something else that's distinctive to him. He says, "when Jesus had been baptized and was praying." We only get that in the Gospel of Luke, that Jesus was praying when he was baptized. Keep your eyes on prayer. One of Luke's favorite themes throughout his gospel is going to be the importance of prayer, and we're going to see Jesus during his public ministry praying before key moments in his ministry, like the Transfiguration or after his temptations in the desert, being driven out by the Holy Spirit and then praying and fasting to prepare for his public ministry. So prayer is central to Luke's gospel, and he alone tells us that it was an important element of the day and the moment when Jesus was baptized.

The other element of Luke's account that's unique to Luke, and distinctive, is that Luke describes the descent of the Holy Spirit in bodily form in the shape of a dove. That's interesting. The Greek word there, *sōmatikō*, literally means bodily, so according to the body. This has led to all kinds of speculation, right. You know, did the Holy Spirit become incarnate as a bird? You know, what does that mean that he descended in bodily form, *sōmatikō eidei*, in bodily form. We'll come back to that at the end of the video and we'll look at how St. Thomas Aquinas and other doctors of the church have explained that phrase in Luke. But for now, I just want to emphasize that it's another clue to the importance of the Holy Spirit, right. Luke is making really clear to us that when the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove, it isn't just a metaphor, in other words, that there is a visible manifestation of the Spirit in the form of a dove coming down upon Jesus. Just like in the Acts of the Apostles the Holy Spirit descends in a visible form in tongues as of fire. So Luke's very interested in these visible manifestations of the Holy Spirit, starting with the Baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River.

The final element of Luke's account of the baptism of Jesus isn't unique, but it's still important. It's this, it's the revelation of the three persons of the Trinity. Notice that at the Baptism of Jesus, all three persons are present and active. The Father speaks: "this is my beloved Son." The Son is revealed through the words of the Father. Jesus isn't just the Messiah, he's the Son of God, he's the Son of the Father.

And then finally, the Spirit is manifested in the form of the dove. And so the Baptism of Jesus, the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus, in some ways could be called the feast of the Trinity, right. It's kind of the feast of the manifestation of the Trinity. The first manifestation of the Trinity in salvation history, in a powerful visible way, is at the Baptism of Jesus Christ at the beginning of his public ministry. So it's fitting for us as Catholics, given the fact that the Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith, to, in a sense, inaugurate our journey through ordinary time by focusing on this Trinitarian mystery of the Baptism of Christ, because whenever God acts in salvation history he always acts as a tri-personal God. The Father, the Son and the Spirit don't act separately of one another or at odds with one another, they always act together with one another in salvation history, right, as the one God in three persons, and that mystery is being revealed to us today on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

Alright, that's the New Testament. What about the Old Testament passage for today? Well, when it comes to the Baptism of the Lord, as I mentioned earlier, the Old Testament readings are the same every single year, but we can still go back and look at them carefully and kind of draw out some parallels between the Old and New Testaments. So in this case, the first reading is from the Book of Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7. This is what Isaiah says:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law.

Then it skips down to verse six:

“I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Okay, so notice a few themes here. First, this image of the servant, who, if you look at all the passages in Isaiah together, this certain figure, in Isaiah 61 for example, appears to be described as being anointed by the Spirit of God, and the anointed one is another way of referring to the Messiah. So this is a messianic savior figure. And how is he anointed? Well he's anointed by the Spirit, as God says, "I will put my Spirit upon him." Well obviously the church is choosing that here because that's exactly what's happening in the Baptism of Jesus. The Baptism of Jesus is the fulfillment of this prophecy of the servant of the Lord being anointed with the Spirit of God.

Another element of this prophecy that's sort of fascinating is the fact that this anointed servant brings the gospel, or brings the good news, to the Gentiles, right. Which, as we'll see, a very important theme in the Gospel of Luke is the fact that the Gentiles are going to be saved along with Israel. You can see this, you might have missed it, but in verse four when it says, "the coastlands wait for his law." The coastlands is always an image in the Old Testament for the Gentile peoples. You might remember in the Old Testament, for example, the Philistines, who were the pagan enemies of David, they lived on the coast of the holy land. So the coast and the sea, like Rome and Greece, those lands across the sea were always associated with the pagan peoples of the worlds. So when it says the coastlands wait for the Torah, the law of the servant, what Isaiah is describing here is a new Torah, a new law. It is not going to be like the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses, the Torah of Moses, was just meant for the Jewish people, just meant for the people of Israel, the 12 tribes; but the law of the servant who is anointed with the Spirit is going to be for the Gentiles, and the Gentiles are waiting for that new law to come to them when the servant is finally anointed with the Spirit. And that's what it means when he says I've given you as "a light to the nations." The nations there, the Hebrew word *goyim* is just another word for the Gentiles, for the pagans. They're going to receive the light of the new law of the servant, who again, in light of other passages in Isaiah, can be interpreted as the Messiah.

So the reason the church picks this passage as background to the Baptism of Jesus is because Jesus is being revealed as the beloved, not just the Son, but the beloved servant of God, in whom God's soul takes delight, upon whom the Spirit comes, and who will eventually bring this new law, this new light, not just to Israel but to the Gentiles as well. That's what he's going to do, and the way you'll know he's the

servant — I almost missed this but it's important — is through his miracles, right. He's going to open the eyes of the blind, he's going to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon. That's exactly what Jesus is going to begin to do in his public ministry, open people's eyes to the truth of his new law, but also literally open their eyes through his healings, and his signs, and his wonders.

Alright, that's the Old Testament reading for today. What about the Psalm? What about the Responsorial Psalm? Well if you look, the Psalm for today is Psalm 29. And at first glance it might look like it really doesn't have much to do with the other readings, but if you look a little bit closer you'll see that the church has very subtly included the Psalm, and it's really important, and actually makes beautiful sense right where it is. So in Psalm 29, what we have here is a Psalm praising God for his glory and his might and his strength, and it uses the imagery of the voice of the Lord. In Hebrew the word for voice is *qōl* and it's frequently a kind of technical term for the thunderous voice of God, like when God speaks in a revelation; but it's also used to describe the voice of God that's manifest in creation as well, that God, in a sense, speaks to us through the book of creation. So if you look here in Psalm 29:2 and following, this is what it says:

Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy array.
The voice of the Lord is upon the waters; the God of glory thunders,
the Lord, upon many waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful, the voice
of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars, the
Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.

Then it skips down to verse nine:

The voice of the Lord makes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forests bare;
and in his temple all cry, "Glory!" The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever.

Okay, what does any of that have to do with the baptism of Jesus? Well, I want you to think about it for just a minute. Look at that first verse: "the voice of the Lord is upon the waters." Hmm, when's the last time the voice of the Lord was upon the waters? Well if you're a First Century Jew, you would know it's in the first chapter

of the Book of Genesis, right, because Genesis begins by saying in the beginning the Lord created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was formless and void, and the Spirit of the Lord hovered about upon the face of the deep. I'm kind of paraphrasing there, but what it's describing is an image of the Spirit of God going about over the face of the waters. And then God speaks, he says, "let there be light"; and there was light." So the very first paragraph of the Old Testament is about the voice of the Lord bringing light into existence, right, bringing creation into existence. So the Psalm is, in a sense, echoing the description of creation when God's voice thundered upon the waters at the dawn of time, but it also points forward then to the baptism of Jesus, because one of the most distinctive things about the baptism of Jesus is that the Father speaks.

If you go through the gospels the Father is rather quiet, right. He only speaks on three occasions in all four gospels. He speaks at the baptism of Jesus, he speaks at the transfiguration of Jesus, and he speaks right before the passion of Jesus in John 12, but that's it. And each time he only says a line or two, right. Maybe it's like your dad, he never says anything, he never talks, right. That's how fathers are sometimes, they're just kind of quiet, they don't say a lot. But when they speak, you need to listen because it's important. So in this case, the voice of the Lord at Jesus' baptism is thundering upon the waters of the Jordan River, not with the old creation, but with the new creation that's being inaugurated through Christ. What is he saying? "Thou art my beloved Son; in whom I am well pleased." So the baptism of Jesus, in a sense, fulfills the first creation and inaugurates a new creation, and Psalm 29 acts as a bridge between the two, and even the element of the Lord speaking in his Temple is significant because in the baptism the voice of the father speaks from heaven. He doesn't come down to earth, the Father doesn't come down to earth, he speaks from his heavenly Temple and his voice echoes and resounds, so to speak, over the waters of the Jordan River as he reveals the identity and the mission of his Son. That's what's going on in this mystery of the baptism of the Lord.

Now in closing then I'd just like to backup and answer that question, well what about the Holy Spirit? How are we to understand Luke's statement that the Holy Spirit came down in bodily form? This is one of those questions that as a professor I get a lot when we look at this passage in class. Students want to ask how to understand that, and what I would say is this, whenever you have one of those curious

passages, don't try to reinvent the wheel. Ask yourself, well how was it interpreted in the sacred tradition of the church? How did ancient Christian writers read this first? How did medieval Christian writers, like St. Thomas Aquinas, what did they have to say? And usually you'll find, if there's a puzzling passage, people have thought about it before, right. You're not the first one to notice it. So in the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, Thomas has a whole article just on that element of the Holy Spirit coming down in the form of a dove and what does it mean. I'm just going to give you a quick paragraph excerpt from it, and you can see how St. Thomas Aquinas answered the question by drawing on people who had gone before him, quoting St. Augustine, in the Fourth Century, and St. John Chrysostom, also in the Fourth Century. So this is what St. Thomas Aquinas has to say in the *Summa Theologica*:

As Augustine says (*De Trin.* ii.), the Holy Ghost is said to have descended on Christ in a bodily shape, as a dove, not... by reason of His being *united* to the dove: but... because the dove itself signified the Holy Ghost, inasmuch as it *descended* when it came upon Him...²

He continues:

As Chrysostom says (*Hom. xii. in Matth.*): *At the beginning of all spiritual transactions sensible visions appear, for the sake of them who cannot conceive at all an incorporeal nature; ... so that, though afterwards no such thing occur, they may shape their faith according to that which has occurred once for all.* And therefore the Holy Ghost descended visibly, under a bodily shape, on Christ at His baptism, in order that we may believe Him to descend invisibly on all those who are baptized.

Okay, so what does all that mean? It means this. First, when Luke says that the Holy Spirit descends in the bodily form of a dove, he does not mean that the third person of the Trinity assumed a bird nature and became incarnate, in the same way that the second person of the Trinity assumed a human nature and became fully

² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 39, Art. 6

man while remaining fully God. That's not what we're talking about. So there is no kind of incarnation of the Holy Spirit. Instead, what you might describe this as a manifestation, or an apparition, in a sensible form, much like the descent of the Holy Spirit in terms of tongues of fire at Pentecost, right. Nobody thinks that the Holy Spirit, you know, united itself to flames and actually became incarnate as flames. The point is, that the Holy Spirit manifests his presence through this visible apparition of these flames in order to show us, through our senses, what is happening super-sensibly or invisibly, the grace that is being communicated spiritually through this activity.

And what Chrysostom, and Augustine, and Aquinas are saying is God will do this at certain points in salvation history. He may have visible manifestations of his presence and visible manifestations of his power so that those of us who receive the same graces through the sacrament of Baptism, or with reference to Pentecost through the sacrament of Confirmation, can believe that the invisible grace is actually being given to us even though we can't see it, right. So people will sometimes say, "well Dr. Pitre, you know, I was baptized and I didn't feel anything, you know, nothing happened, I didn't see anything." Or even more, "I went to confirmation, I had my confirmation, and there were no tongues of fire at my confirmation. I didn't feel anything, I didn't see anything. How do I know that I actually received the Holy Spirit?" And the answer is you know, first of all because the word of God tells you, but secondly, because God himself manifested his presence and his power in the form of a dove at the baptism of Jesus, God the Holy Spirit, and also in the form of tongues of fire at the first Pentecost. And those accounts of those first visible manifestations are meant to lead you to faith in the invisible coming of the Holy Spirit at your baptism and at your confirmation. So I just hope that's a helpful way of understanding it. What we don't mean is that the Holy Spirit becomes incarnate as a bird. What we do mean is that the Holy Spirit manifests himself visibly and tangibly in this dove that descends upon Christ at the moment of his baptism.