

The Baptism of the Lord

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7
<i>Response</i>	May the Lord bless his people with peace!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10
<i>Second Reading</i>	Acts 10:34-38
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 3:13-17

Today the Church celebrates the great feast of the Baptism of the Lord. We’re in Year A, so we’re going to be looking at the account of the Baptism in the Gospel of Matthew. But before we do that, just an important reminder here that the feast of the Baptism of the Lord is one of these interesting feasts. It’s kind of a bridge between Christmas time—between the season of Christmas—and Ordinary Time, where we begin our journey through the Gospel of Matthew looking at the public ministry of Jesus. So technically, the Baptismal feast (the feast of the Baptism) is in Christmas—it’s the very end of the Christmas season, but it’s also launching us into our journey through the public ministry and the life of Jesus that will take place over the course of the next 34 weeks in Year A, as we walk step by step with Jesus through the Gospel of Matthew.

So in order to bring Christmas to an end and to begin that process of journeying through the Gospel of Matthew, the Church takes us to Matthew 3:13-17. This is Matthew’s account of the Baptism of Jesus. Now the Baptism of Jesus is given in all four Gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and even John has his own take on that—but this is probably the most famous and the most familiar to most people. So let’s read through it together, and then we’ll unpack it and look at how it goes with the Old Testament. And also we’re going to hone in on a peculiar aspect of this account that’s only present in the Gospel of Matthew. So Matthew 3:13 says this:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”¹

Okay, so what’s going on here in the story of Jesus’ Baptism? I think most of us are kind of familiar with the fact that the Baptism of Jesus marks the end, in a sense, or the climax of John the Baptist’s ministry and the beginning or the transition into the public ministry of Jesus Himself. But what would it have meant in a first century Jewish context? What would it have meant to Matthew’s initial Jewish Christian readers—people who are reading the Gospel through the eyes of first century Judaism? In their perspective, there are a few things that would stand out here from the Baptism of Jesus.

Number one: the geography. It’s really important here for us to be familiar with the geography of Matthew’s Gospel, because geography in the Holy Land isn’t just geographical, it’s theological. So places have theological significance. So when Matthew says that Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan (to John) every first century Jew would have known that Galilee was the northern territory. It was the place where the ten northern tribes had once dwelled and that Judea in the south was the place of the two southern tribes...and that the Jordan, in particular, was a river that ran southeast of the city of Jerusalem and poured its waters into the famous Dead Sea.

So the Jordan River was basically the eastern border of the Holy Land—the eastern border of the Promised Land. And every Jew would have known that in the history of salvation in the Old Testament, that the Jordan was particularly significant because it was the place where the exodus from Egypt had come to an end. So if

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.

you recall, at the time of Moses in the book of Exodus, when the Israelites are set free from Pharaoh and they begin their journey toward the Promised Land, the exodus—which means “the going out”—really wasn’t accomplished until 40 years later. They crossed over the waters of the river Jordan and entered into the Promised Land.

Now that is narrated in the book of Joshua, chapters 3 and 4. If you go back to the book of Joshua, you’ll notice something interesting about the crossing of the river Jordan. I think most of us are familiar with the crossing of the Red Sea at the beginning of the exodus, because there have been movies made out of it. But there haven’t been as many movies made out of the book of Joshua, so we tend to be a little less familiar with this text. But in the book of Joshua 3, it describes the people crossing the Jordan to enter the Promised Land. And listen to what it says in Joshua 3:14 and following:

...when the people set out from their tents, to pass over the Jordan with the priests bearing the ark of the covenant before the people, and when those who bore the ark had come to the Jordan, and the feet of the priests bearing the ark were dipped in the brink of the water, the waters coming down from above stood and rose up in a heap far off, at Adam, the city that is beside Zar’ethan, and those flowing down toward the sea of the Arabah, the Salt Sea...

That’s the Dead Sea.

...were wholly cut off; and the people passed over opposite Jericho. And while all Israel were passing over on dry ground, the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord stood on dry ground in the midst of the Jordan, until all the nation finished passing over the Jordan.

Okay, so notice here, for a Jew in the first century, there are two miraculous crossings of water—the crossing of the Red Sea at the beginning of the exodus and the crossing of the Jordan River at the end of the exodus. So when John goes out into the wilderness, and he’s proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, any first century Jew familiar with the Old Testament would

have caught the echoes of the exodus from Egypt by John's location and the Jordan River.

And as I've shown in my book, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, and elsewhere, in the first century AD, you have to understand, the Jewish people were waiting for many different things to happen. One of them—one of the central hopes—was not just the coming of the Messiah, but the coming of a new exodus in which God would save His people in the future age of salvation like He had saved them in the first era of salvation, the exodus from Egypt. So there would be parallels between the old exodus and the new exodus here.

So John, when he's proclaiming to the people a baptism of repentance, and he's beginning to tell them the kingdom of Heaven is at hand, they would have recognized that he's heralding the coming of the new exodus...and that the Messiah that was expected to come would be like a new Moses who would inaugurate this new exodus. So when John goes out to the Jordan River, all those echoes of the exodus are there. And so what the people are doing is they're preparing the way of the Lord by repenting of sin in order to help usher in, so to speak, to be prepared for the coming of the Messiah, the coming of the kingdom of God.

Now in that context, John is baptizing, and it says very explicitly—this is the second point—it was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. It says that earlier at the beginning of Matthew 3. And so when Jesus goes down to receive the Baptism, John is—so to speak—brought to a halt. He objects, because he says, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?" Now this objection of John is only in Matthew's account, so we only know about it from this account of the Baptism of Jesus—very interesting here. Because as we know from elsewhere in the New Testament, like Hebrews 4, Jesus is fully human, but He's like us in all things except sin. And we see that kind of implied here by John's response. Because if John is giving a baptism of repentance from sin—for the sinners, people who are sinful in the people of Israel—then why does Jesus need to receive it if He himself is sinless?

Now Jesus answers the question by saying this:

“Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

Now you might be thinking, “Okay, thanks...that clears everything up.” This is one of those sayings where we read the Gospel, and we proclaim the Gospel of the Lord, and everyone says, “Thanks be to God” or “Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ”...but in the back of your mind you’re thinking, “I’m not really sure exactly what that meant.” It’s one of those puzzles. I’m going to come back to that in just a minute, so press pause on that. Hold it for a second, because I want to end by looking at exactly what Jesus says there.

For now, the point is this: John recognizes that Jesus doesn’t need Baptism for repentance, but Jesus wants to do it for some reason. It’s fitting for Him to do it so that He can fulfill all righteousness. At the very least, the language of “fulfilled” in the Gospel of Matthew should make you think of the fulfillment of Scripture...that there’s some prophetic dimension to Jesus’ action here. There’s some typological dimension to Jesus’ action here—that He is fulfilling the Scripture and He’s fulfilling salvation history in some way, shape, or form by going through the Baptism of Jesus.

And I think that that—although as we’ll see in a minute—there’s another meaning to His words. I think that’s really clear if you look at Matthew’s account of the Baptism of Jesus for a couple of reasons. Notice here what happens, when Jesus goes down into the water, He comes up out of the water and the Heavens were opened, and He sees the Spirit of God descending like a dove.

Now most of us are probably aware here that what’s happening is a kind of anointing of Jesus with the Holy Spirit. So He’s going down into the waters, and the Spirit is coming upon Him, and He’s being anointed by the Spirit of God, because that’s what the Messiah is—the word *christos*, messiah, means “anointed one.” And just as David was anointed with oil in the Old Testament when he was made king over Israel, so now Jesus—the true King—is being anointed, but not with the oil from a horn like David, who had oil poured over him by Samuel...but with the very spirit of God Himself coming down upon Him in the form of a dove. So we see here another echo. This is an echo of David being anointed king over Israel, but it’s Jesus here being anointed with the Spirit of God.

A third—or fourth or second, I can't remember how many I've said here—a third echo of the Old Testament is in that line, “The heavens were open.” Now you might just think, “Oh, well okay. That's just how the Spirit comes down from Heaven”—because the Spirit is in Heaven, so the Heavens have to be open for Him to come down. But any first century Jew familiar with the Old Testament would have had another passage from the Old Testament in mind, and that is the ascension of Elijah into Heaven.

So although most of us are probably familiar with the fact that at the end of his life, Elijah the prophet is taken up into Heaven, what we tend to forget is where that happened. In the book of Kings—in 2 Kings 2—it tells us that Elijah was taken up into Heaven after he parted the waters of the Jordan River. So what happens is that Elijah, at the end of his life, goes to the Jordan River, and there the Heavens open and he is taken up into Heaven. So that's the Old Testament background.

Jesus...something similar happens to at His Baptism. In His case—watch this, this is really fascinating—it isn't the waters of the Jordan that part so He can go into the Promised Land like the exodus from Egypt. It's the heavens that are opened, in the same sense that Elijah went up into Heaven at the end of His life.

So Jesus here is—at His Baptism—there's being revealed the nature of the new exodus. So the first exodus was an earthly journey to an earthly Promised Land. But when Jesus goes down into the waters of the Jordan, it's not the waters that part so He can go into the earthly Promised Land. It's the Heavens that part so the Spirit can come down upon Him.

So what is going to be the ultimate destination of the new exodus of Jesus? It's not the earthly Promised Land. It's the heavenly Promised Land, the one to which Elijah was taken at the end of his life—at the Jordan River. So you've got to think about the theological geography here. All of these echoes of the Old Testament...all of these connections or parallels between the Old and the New are kind of being woven into this one tapestry of Jesus' Baptism. A lot is going on here in this one moment.

So, in other words, Jesus is inaugurating a new exodus through His Baptism...but that's not all. There's another allusion to the Old Testament. You might be wondering here, why does the Holy Spirit descend in the form of a dove? This is something that's common again to all four accounts of the Baptism, but it is a little unusual. Couldn't the Holy Spirit descend in the form of a pillar of cloud or a pillar of fire or light from Heaven? Why a dove? That's a very interesting and unusual thing. And although most people—when they see the imagery of a dove—they just assume that a dove means peace. That's not actually the primary association of a dove in the Scriptures. It is true that doves that can be symbols of peace in different contexts and different cultures.

But in a biblical perspective and from a first century Jewish perspective, the first time a dove appears in the Old Testament is in the book of Genesis in the account of the flood. In Genesis 8, you'll recall that after Noah and the ark come to rest on the top of Mount Ararat, and the waters begin to recede, Noah sends out a raven that never comes back. And then he sends out a dove, and the dove brings back a freshly plucked olive leaf. And that olive leaf is a sign of the restoration of creation. That after the waters of death destroy all human life and wipe all of the sin out of the world—that's what the flood is sent for in Genesis 6. Human beings have grown so sinful and violent that God sends a flood to cleanse the world of sin, and then saves Noah, preserves Noah. After the flood, when the dove comes down from Heaven to Noah with the olive branch in its beak, the olive branch is a symbol of the new creation—that creation has been restored, that new life has sprung up out of the waters of death that were the flood.

If you fast forward back to the New Testament, what happens here? Just as the new creation—life—emerge, the olive tree emerged out of the waters of death after the flood in the Old Testament, so now Jesus (watch this) emerges out of the waters of Baptism in the river Jordan, and the Holy Spirit descends upon Him in the form of a dove to anoint Him with the Spirit. So what does this mean? It means that Jesus isn't just inaugurating a new exodus that's going to have its final destination in the heavenly kingdom. He's also the beginning of a new creation, which will bring about a new cleansing of the world from sin. And it's going to be through the waters of His Baptism—as we'll see—and of our Baptism that sin will be dealt with and that sin will be cleansed.

So there are all kinds of images here that are taking place in the Baptism of Jesus. He's inaugurating a new exodus, he's bringing about a new creation, and there's one more that's very important. It's the image of Jesus as the new Isaac. Well, where do we see that? It's in the very last line of the account of the Baptism here, when God says:

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:17)

Any first century Jew, again, familiar with the book of Genesis, which was very popular...the books of Moses—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—were as familiar to first century Jews as the four Gospels are for us as Catholics, practicing Catholics, because that's what they would read every Sabbath, every Saturday in the synagogue. So if you go back to the Old Testament, if you think about the image of a beloved son, the first person that's going to come to mind is Isaac in Genesis 22, the famous story of the sacrifice of Isaac. When Father Abraham is told by God in Genesis 22:2:

“Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Mori'ah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

So what's happening? As we know, Abraham obeys. He takes his son Isaac. Isaac carries the wood of his own sacrifice up the mountain of Moriah. And then just as Abraham is about to sacrifice his son to slay him, the angel of the Lord comes and stops him. And instead of sacrificing his son, he points him to a ram caught by its horns in the thicket and says to sacrifice the ram. But the response to Abraham's willingness to offer his son, in Genesis 22:15, it says this:

...the angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, “By myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will indeed bless you, and I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore.

And then in verse 18 it says:

...and by your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves, because you have obeyed my voice.”

So notice what happens. Through Abraham’s obedience to God, his willingness to offer his only beloved son in a sacrifice, somehow all the nations of the Earth are going to be blessed through that. Now it’s not immediately apparent how that’s fulfilled in the life of Abraham. But in the New Testament, as we’ll see, that promise for all the nations—which means Israel and the Gentiles to be blessed—is not going to come through the sacrifice of Abraham’s beloved son, because he wasn’t actually even sacrificed, right? God didn’t intend for Abraham to actually go all the way through with it. What he intended for is for Abraham to perform an act that would prefigure what the heavenly Father would do with His own beloved Son, Jesus, in His passion and His death on Calvary, on the cross.

So when Jesus comes up out of the water in Matthew 3 in the Baptism, and God says:

“This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

...this reveals to us that Jesus isn’t just inaugurating a new exodus. He’s not just the beginning of a new creation. He’s also the new Isaac, the new beloved Son, who will actually lay down His life so that all the nations of the world—not just Israel, but the Gentiles as well—can be blessed by the forgiveness of sins, by the ransom for sins that His death will bring about on Calvary and on the cross.

So...a lot going on there. All of that is swirling around underneath the surface of the Baptism of Jesus. And it’s very important, because it helps us understand: Why does the Church have an entire Sunday just dedicated to the Baptism of the Lord? It’s because the Baptism of Jesus isn’t just the end of John’s ministry and the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. The Baptism of Jesus is a sign. It’s a revelation that points back to the Old Testament and the way Jesus is beginning to fulfill the hope for a new exodus, the hope for a new creation, the hope for a new sacrifice that would bring about the forgiveness of sins. But it’s also pointing forward to the

way He's going to do that. Because the way He's going to do that is not through the waters of His Baptism in the river Jordan, primarily, it's through His Baptism in blood on the cross at Calvary.

And you'll see this elsewhere in the Gospels. Jesus will refer to the crucifixion—His crucifixion—as His Baptism. So for example, when James and John come up to Jesus, and they say, “We want to sit at your right and left hand in Your kingdom.” What does Jesus say to them? “Can you drink the cup that I drink, and can you be baptized with the Baptism with which I am baptized?”

Now you might think James and John are scratching their heads thinking, “Well, yeah. We were baptized with the Baptism with which you were baptized. We were disciples of John the Baptist. We received his Baptism.” (There is some speculation about that. There's a debate about that, so don't take that too literally.) But it's just...you can see how they might have thought He was referring to the Baptism of John. But He's not talking about the Baptism of the past. He's talking about the Baptism of the cross, because to drink the cup and to be baptized are images for the suffering He's going to undergo on Calvary.

So in other words, the Baptism of Jesus is an anticipation of what He will accomplish in His crucifixion as the new Isaac, the new beloved Son of God the Father, whom God will offer and who will offer Himself as Son for the salvation of all the nations of the world, for the blessing of all the nations of the world.

Alright, so that's kind of the basics—that's the basics. If you've got that, you're fine, okay. But I want to throw in one more little insight, because this is Year A and we're looking at Matthew's account. And only Matthew's account has this curious line where Jesus gives the reason for the Baptism. And He says:

...thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.

Now many scholars take that as just meaning to fulfill the Scripture in the ways that I've just laid out for you. And I don't think that's erroneous, but as one scholar, Nathan Eubank—he is a professor at the University of Notre Dame. And he wrote this great book called *Wages of Cross-Bearing and Debt of Sin*. This is his

dissertation. As he argues in this book, very convincingly, there is actually a primary meaning to Jesus' words. Because it's strange when He says "fulfill all righteousness." He doesn't say "to fulfill Scripture." If He had said that, it would be clear He just means to fulfill Scripture. But "to fulfill all righteousness" is an unusual expression. And as Eubank argues—and I think he's right about this—if you look at the language that Jesus is using here in the context of other sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, it actually seems here that Jesus is tapping into an ancient Jewish concept of how righteous actions can fill up a treasury, the heavenly treasury, of merits and good deeds...just as sinful actions can fill up our heavenly debts with God.

So you might think...well, what does that mean? Let me just walk you through it step by step here. In order to see this, we'll have to look at a few parallels from elsewhere in the Gospel of Matthew.

Okay, so if you look at other sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, let's start with the first: when Jesus uses the imagery of sin as a debt. Now most of us are familiar with the Our Father. You probably have it memorized. But in English, we say "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us." And that's not a literal translation. It's a little misleading, because "trespasses" in English—it's kind of an archaic word for breaking some rule. But the literal Greek of the prayer says "Forgive us our debts"—in Greek, *opheilēma*— "as we forgive our debtors"...*opheiletēs* (Matthew 6:12).

So clearly there, what's being implied is that sin is like a debt. And so when we sin against God, what happens is we build up a debt with Him. And we ask Him to forgive us that debt, just as we forgive those who are indebted to us. Because when other people sin against us, they become our debtors. They build up a debt to us as well. And for all those of you who out there who have college loans or a mortgage or any kind of debt, you know what this is like. It's a burden that you have to pay. It can weigh on you. And that's what sin does. It's like a burden. It's a debt that we carry around. And until we pay off that debt—whether it's a mortgage or a student loan or whatever it might be—we're under the weight of that burden. So this was a very common metaphor for sin in the Old Testament. It isn't just breaking a rule, it's a debt, a debt to God and a debt to our neighbor.

Now by contrast here, another image is that a righteous action—in a first century Jewish mindset—is something that deserves a reward, or it’s actually a kind of wage. You can see Jesus uses that also in the Sermon of the Mount, Matthew 6:1. Jesus says this, and I’m translating literally:

“Beware of [doing righteousness] before men in order to be seen by them; for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven.
(Matthew 6:1)

What’s Jesus talking about? Well, notice the words He uses there. “Doing righteousness”—what does that mean, to do righteousness? It’s the same word Jesus uses in the Baptism, when He says “fulfill all righteousness”—*dikaiousuné*. And in a Jewish context, to do righteousness is to do righteous deeds. It’s the opposite of sins; it’s good deeds. And the example Jesus gives are prayer as a righteous deed, fasting as a righteous deed, and giving to the poor (almsgiving) are righteous deeds.

And what Jesus is saying here is, don’t do those righteous deeds in order to be seen by other people, because then you’re going to lose the wage (or the reward) that you have in Heaven. And the Greek word there is *misthos*. It’s literally...it’s translated as “reward,” but it literally is a wage. So like when you on Friday to get your paycheck, you’re getting your *misthos* for the work that you did that week for your employer.

Well, Jesus here is using Jewish language, and He’s saying: What does sin do? It builds up a debt. What do righteous deeds, what do good deeds do? They earn a reward. They earn a wage or a payment. Okay, so keep going with me...track with me here. This is really important.

Now, that’s...both of those are metaphors, because we’re talking about a spiritual reality. And so elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus takes that same imagery for righteous deeds, and He talks about how we are supposed to live as His disciples—using the image of a treasury or a bank in Heaven. Listen:

“Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Now most of us are familiar with this teaching, where your treasure is, your heart will be also. Or don't build up treasure in Earth; build up treasure in Heaven. And we think of it as kind of a pretty metaphor. But in first century Judaism, it's not just a pretty metaphor. It's a technical term for what happens when we do righteous deeds on Earth. When we do righteous deeds on Earth, we in a sense put money into our heavenly bank account. We build up our treasury—the Greek word there is *thēsauros*, actually. That's where we get the English word “thesaurus” from. A thesaurus is...in English, thesaurus is a treasury of words. It's literally what it means. It's a book that has all these precious words in it.

In first century Judaism, a thesaurus is literally a bank treasury. It's like a treasure chest — so you can imagine it that way — where you store your wealth. So Jesus is saying that through righteous actions, build up your treasure chest in Heaven. Because wherever your treasure chest is, that's where your heart is. So notice what He's talking about here. What goes on in the heart? He's using the image of the treasury to talk about righteous deeds that are done not to be seen by others, but from love of God and love of neighbor...done from the heart. That's how we build up our heavenly bank account.

Now, alright, with that in mind, let's back up. What then does this have to do with what Jesus says to John the Baptist, when He says:

“I need to be baptized by you...for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” (Matthew 3:14b, 15b)

Well, in order to understand this, we have to recognize the language of “fulfill” means. And it can be used to refer to fulfilling Scripture, but it's also used in the Gospel of Matthew as a metaphor for filling up one's debts or for filling up one's

heavenly treasure. So for example, in Matthew 22, if you look here. When Jesus is speaking against His opponents, remember what He says to them. He says:

...you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. Fill up..

The Greek word there, *plēroō*...

Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?

That's Matthew 23:31-33. And you might be thinking...what does that mean? Fill up the measure of your fathers. Well, what Jesus is doing there is He's drawing on another biblical image of sin as a debt, in which as a particular group of people sin, they have a certain limit they can run to—a debt ceiling, so to speak. And once they cross that debt ceiling, they bring down the judgment of God. You'll see this in the Old Testament where it talks about the sin of the Amalekites is not yet complete. It's not yet filled up. Once that sin's filled up, God's punishment is going to come down on them. Once they reach the debt ceiling, God's judgment comes down. Once they max out their divine credit card, in other words, they're going to bring down the punishment of God.

So Jesus here is using this image to show that you can either fill up the debt of sin by doing bad things, or you can fill up the treasure chest of righteousness by doing righteous actions. And the Pharisees and the scribes that He's talking about here, He's saying, "You're filling up the measure of the debt of your father's sins, because they murdered the prophets...and now you're opposing me." So He's saying, if you fill up that measure, how are you going to escape being sentenced to Gehenna?

Now, with all of that in mind, go forward to Jesus' statement to the rich young man. Remember when He calls the rich young man in Matthew 19? He uses the same image again here, when He says this...the rich young man comes to him and says, "I've kept all the commandments. Is there anything else I need to do?" And what does Jesus say? Listen:

“If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” (Matthew 19:21)

And the guy goes away sad, because he has many possessions. So notice, what’s Jesus doing there? He’s saying, if you want to build up treasure in Heaven, what do you have to do? You have to do righteous deeds. You have to give to the poor, and then You also have to follow me. In other words, it’s not enough to just obey the commandments. You want to be perfect, you want to be complete. Give to the poor, and you’ll have treasure in Heaven. You’ll build up your treasure in Heaven, and then come and follow me.

So with all of that in mind, go back to Jesus’ words. When He says to John the Baptist, “It is fitting for me to be baptized in order to fill up all righteousness,” what is He talking about? He’s talking about the fact that as the beloved Son of God, as the new Isaac, when He goes down into the waters of the Baptism of His crucifixion, His righteousness will be so infinitely great that He will be able to fill up the measure of righteous deeds and pay off not just your debt or my debt, but all of the debts of all of the sins of all humanity. That’s why it’s fitting for Him to be baptized. He doesn’t need to be baptized for His own sin, because He didn’t have any. Just like He doesn’t need to go to the cross. He isn’t going to the cross for His sake. He’s going to the cross for our sake. He isn’t going down into the waters of Baptism for His sake. He’s going down into the waters of Baptism to fill up the measure of righteousness, so that He can pay off the debts of all the sins of all the human beings who have ever been created.

Now, I don’t know if you’re in a lot of debt, like a lot of people are in a lot of debt. But think about the debt of every sin ever committed. What kind of debt are we talking about? And Jesus says that His righteousness is able to fill that measure up. And if you had any doubts about that, just one last saying from Jesus. How does Jesus describe His death? Matthew 20:28—most famous verse, one of the most famous verses in the Gospel:

“...the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28)

Now the Greek word there, “ransom”—*lutron*—literally means a ransom. It’s what you do when you pay off someone else’s debt. So for example, in first century Judaism—and Eubank shows this in his book brilliantly—in many cases, when a person would go to prison, they would go to what was called debtor’s prison. The point of putting you in prison was not so you could languish there for the rest of your life. Often times, you would end up in prison because you were in debt. They didn’t have bankruptcy back then. So you would go to debtor’s prison, and the only way you could get out of the prison is if a loved one or a family member would pay your ransom, would pay off your debts. And then you’d be free.

So what is Jesus doing? He’s describing His mission as Son of man as a redeemer, as a ransomer, as someone who has come into the world not to be served, but to pay the debts of the multitude as a ransom for the many. When does He do that? It’s going to be on the cross, when He goes down into the waters of death on the cross and pays the ransom for your debts and for mine, when He takes our sin upon Himself through His act of redemption.

So...oh man, there’s so much to talk about here. It’s just so fascinating. Isn’t it interesting, too, that traditionally, of course, all of the Church Fathers are unanimous in attributing the Gospel of Matthew to Matthew the tax collector. And it’s Matthew’s Gospel more than all the other Gospels combined that uses economic language—these economic metaphors to explain the mystery of redemption.

Now if you have any doubts about that...again, you can always read Dr. Eubank’s book, *Wages of Cross-Bearing and Debt of Sin*...but you can also just look at the first reading for today. Because if you go back to the first reading, it’s the passage from Isaiah about the servant of Isaiah. So in Isaiah 42:1-4, background to the Baptism of Jesus, it says this:

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 [righteousness].
He will not fail or be discouraged
till he has established justice [righteousness] in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his law.

And then it skips down to verse 6:

“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.

Wow. So notice what you have here. You have the description of this chosen servant who has the Spirit of God upon him and who will establish the righteousness of God, not just for Israel but for the nations, for the Gentiles. And although the first reading doesn't contain it, if you keep reading through Isaiah, this mysterious servant is going to go on and establish righteousness precisely by being put to death. And at the very end of Isaiah 3, the famous account of the suffering servant who is cut off from the land of the living, who makes himself an offering for sin, and then it says in verse 11, Isaiah 53:

...by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous...he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

So what's Jesus doing here in the Baptism of John? I think here that you can show that He is also revealing that He is the suffering servant who will fill up the measure of righteousness through His suffering and death...and thereby make many, the multitude, to be righteous through His atoning sacrifice on the cross.

Now, in closing then...what about the living tradition? You might think, “Wow, Dr. Pitre, I’ve never heard this before. I’ve always thought of the Baptism of Jesus as just the revelation of the Trinity, maybe—the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit—or the beginning of His public ministry. I’ve never looked at it in light of the cross this way.” Well, you don’t have to take my word for it. In the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI says this about Baptism:

Looking at the events in light of the Cross and Resurrection, the Christian people realized what had happened: Jesus loaded the burden of all mankind’s guilt upon his shoulders; he bore it down into the depths of the Jordan. He inaugurated his public activity by stepping into the place of sinners. His inaugural gesture is an anticipation of the Cross... The Baptism is an acceptance of death for the sins of humanity, and the voice that calls out “This is my beloved Son” over the baptismal waters is an anticipatory reference to the Resurrection. This also explains why, in his own discourses, Jesus uses the word baptism to refer to his death (cf. Mark 10:38; Lk 12:51). Only from this starting point can we understand Christian Baptism. Jesus’ Baptism anticipated his death on the Cross, and the heavenly voice proclaimed an anticipation of the Resurrection.²

That’s from Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, volume 1, page 18. So notice, we might have forgotten this, but Pope Benedict didn’t. What happens in the Baptism is just as Jesus goes down into the water and comes up out of it, so too He will go down into the waters of death and yet be resurrected on the third day from the grave...so that not only will the sins of humanity be atoned for, but so that they might be restored to new life in the new creation of the resurrection.

So in closing then, you might be thinking, “Okay, well, that all sounds great, Dr. Pitre, but...I’m a little uncomfortable with this language of sin as a debt and righteous deeds as wages and building up this treasure in Heaven. I mean, doesn’t that sound a little mercenary or utilitarian? And yes, I know contemporary scholars might be saying that, but where do we see that language in the Church?”

² Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 1.18

And I would just close with one last point here. The Church itself actually takes Jesus' language of the treasure in Heaven—or the treasury, the thesaurus—and actually applies it to the treasury of Christ's merits in her teaching about indulgences, for example. So in the section of the *Catechism* on indulgences, listen to these words. This is *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1476:

We also call these spiritual goods of the communion of saints the Church's treasury, which is “not the sum total of the material goods which have accumulated during the course of the centuries. On the contrary the ‘treasury of the Church’ is the infinite value, which can never be exhausted, which Christ's merits have before God. They were offered so that the whole of mankind could be set free from sin and attain communion with the Father. In Christ, the Redeemer himself, the satisfactions and merits of his Redemption exist and find their efficacy.”³

Catechism, paragraph 1476. In other words, according to the Church's teaching, the only reason our righteous deeds—your righteous deeds, my righteous deeds—have any merit before God at the end of the day is because they flow from the merits of Christ's redemption. And the value of His cross is infinite. It's inexhaustible. The merits of His righteous actions are inestimable in their value. And so every baptized person...what happens when you're baptized is you're joined to the Body of Christ. You become part of His body, so that whenever we work, whenever we do something good, it's actually Christ doing it in us. As St. Paul says in Galatians 2:

...it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me... (Galatians 2:20b)

So there's no reason to be anxious about the idea of doing good deeds to build up treasure in Heaven. For one thing, Jesus tells us to do it in the Sermon on the Mount. It's His language—not mine, okay? But for another thing, the Church explains that the reason our good deeds can have merit before God is only because

³ CCC 1476

they are flowing from the infinite merits of Christ which He won when He went to the cross, not just as Savior or Messiah, but as Redeemer, as the ransom for many.