

The Baptism of the Lord

(Years A, B and C)

<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

Every year, the Church for the feast of the Baptism of the Lord has the same second reading. It's taken from Peter's speech to Cornelius in the book of Acts 10. It's focused on preaching the Good News about Jesus with an emphasis on the Baptism of Jesus by John in the Jordan River. So that's why the Church chooses it for today. So we'll just read that text, and then we'll back up and unpack some of its meaning and also its implications for the question of the necessity of Baptism for salvation today. The second reading says this, in Acts 10:34-38:

And Peter opened his mouth and said: "Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ¹

Now you can figure out...it's pretty easy to see why this passage was chosen as the second reading, because Peter is preaching here the Good News, and he brings his

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.

proclamation—he brings his little speech here, short speech—to climax by focusing on the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. And he makes clear there that the word of the Gospel, the word of peace by Jesus Christ, really begins from Galilee after the Baptism which John preached.

So this is really one of the places where we get the notion that Jesus' public ministry, technically speaking, begins after the Baptism of John. There are kind of two stages—John is the forerunner of the Gospel. He begins to prepare people for the Gospel, but then Jesus begins proclaiming it really with the inauguration that takes place at His Baptism. So that's why this is chosen for this week.

However, I'd like to home in on the opening section of this passage and draw some of its implications out, because it's one of those texts in the New Testament that is easily misunderstood and needs to be situated in context...and actually, it has some real implications not just for the Baptism of Jesus, but the sacrament that flows out of His Baptism in our Baptism, and whether it's necessary for salvation or not.

So in Acts 10:34, that opening verse, Peter here says:

Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Now I have seen this verse used as a kind of biblical foundation for a kind of universalism. In other words, some people will point to this text and say, "See, look, all religions are equal really before God. God has no partiality to the Jewish people, for example, or to the Christian Church, for example. But everyone in any nation who fears Him and does what is right is acceptable to Him." So in other words, this can be used for a kind of universalism or relativism—or it's sometimes called indifferentism, where you have an idea that all religions are basically created equal and none of them has any absolute claim to the fullness of truth and to an exclusive way of salvation.

Now, the only way to interpret that verse in that way is to rip it completely out of its context. So I want to look at what it actually means in context. So if you back up—you won't see this in the lectionary for this week—but if you back up a few

verses in Acts 10, the context of Peter's statement here is the famous vision of the sheet that comes down from Heaven and the revelation to Peter by God, through the vision, that He has accepted the Gentile people...that salvation isn't just for the Israelites, but that it's for the Gentiles as well.

So if you might remember in Acts 10, a centurion—a Roman centurion, a pagan, Cornelius—has a dream where he's told to seek out Simon Peter, who is one of the leaders of Jesus' disciples. So while Simon Peter is there in Caesarea, he has a dream in which a sheet descends from Heaven with all kinds of animals on it, including some animals that were unclean—so for example, lizards were considered unclean. I don't know why you would want to eat one anyway, but they were considered unclean so they were forbidden to the Jews.

And in the vision, God says to Peter, "Rise, kill, and eat." And Peter says, "Well, I've never eaten anything unclean." And then the vision comes again. It happens three times. God tells him, "Rise, kill, and eat." And the explanation of the vision is given to Peter, and what God says here is in chapter 10:15:

"What God has cleansed, you must not call common."

And then the sheet is taken up into Heaven. Now what does that mean? What it means is this...that when Jesus goes to the cross, He doesn't just die for the sins of Israel. He dies for the sins of all humanity. In other words, through His passion and death, all of humanity is cleansed of sin. All of humanity is offered the gift of redemption. And so the vision of the sheet is given to Peter to show him that there's no longer clean and unclean, there's no longer a division between Israel and the Gentiles...but God has, so to speak, cleansed the Gentile peoples through the death of Jesus, and therefore, the door is now open for them to come into communion with the beginning of the new Israel, which is represented by Peter and the twelve apostles. And of course that's going to happen primarily through them beginning to baptize Gentiles.

Up to this point, Peter has baptized thousands of people, but if you look at Acts, it's very clear—these are all Jews who were going to Jerusalem for Pentecost. He hasn't...they haven't begun baptizing non-Jews. And so in Acts 10, God says, "No,

the Gentiles are going to be included.” So it’s in that context that Peter says, in the wake of his vision:

Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

So who’s he talking about there? Well, he’s talking about Cornelius, who has come to faith in God and who is actually praying to not just any God, but the God of Israel, and to whom a vision from an angel comes and appears to him and says:

“Your prayers and your alms have ascended as a memorial before God...go and seek out Simon Peter.”

Now as all of this is happening, once Peter finishes his speech, if you skip down to verse 44 in Acts, it says:

While Peter was still saying this, the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word.

...so the centurion, Cornelius there, and the others with him...

And the believers from among the circumcised who came with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God. Then Peter declared, “Can any one forbid water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?” And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

So the context here—again, the lectionary doesn’t give you everything—but the context here isn’t just Peter pointing back to the Baptism of Jesus and talking about how that was the beginning of His public ministry. It’s also the moment when we have the first Baptism of the first Gentiles. Cornelius and his companions are baptized after God pours out the Holy Spirit upon them, and they begin to speak in tongues. They receive...in other words, they receive the same gift of the Holy Spirit—these pagans—that Peter and the apostles received at Pentecost.

Now I say they're pagans, but they're pagans by nationality but not by belief, because it tells us that Cornelius had already begun praying to the God of Israel—that the God of Israel heard his prayers. So there's some context there too for you. So when Peter says:

...I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

What he's not saying there is that if the Egyptian person worships their Egyptian gods, and the Greek person worships the Greek gods, and the Roman person worships the Roman gods, that they're acceptable to God and they're okay—that as long as they do that and they do what is right, they're acceptable to Him. No, what he's saying is, when a Gentile like Cornelius fears the God of Israel and prays to Him and does what is right, He is acceptable to God. And that's why the vision came to Cornelius, to come to Peter and seek what? The gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, which comes to him, above all, in Baptism.

So far from being a kind of text that can be used here to endorse a lax universalism that doesn't have any vision of a Christian mission because everyone's going to be saved through their different religions, Peter's words here is saying, "We can't keep the Gentiles from receiving Baptism, because those of them who fear God and who live according to the commandments, are acceptable to God. And they're so acceptable that we have to bring the Good News of peace by Jesus Christ and offer to them the gift of Baptism, which will cleanse them from sin in the name of Jesus Christ."

So, this is going to be the beginning of the Gentile mission. It's very important. A lot of people think that Paul was the one who came up with the idea of baptizing the Gentiles and the door being open to the Gentiles, and the Gentiles being saved, and the Good News going to the Gentiles—not according to Acts. According to Acts, in Acts 9, Paul is still persecuting the Church. In Acts 10, it's Peter who first opens the door of salvation, through Baptism, to the Gentiles.

Alright, so that's the context today. So what the Church is doing with the second reading there is kind of showing us the implications of the feast, of the celebration of Jesus' Baptism, what its implications are for Christian Baptism, for sacramental Baptism, for Baptism in the life and the mission of the Church after the resurrection. And you'll see that's often what the second reading does. A lot of times it applies the teaching—some teaching of the Gospel—to the Christian life, whether it's the sacramental life or moral life or the life of prayer...any aspect of living the Christian life.

Now with that said, then, I'm sure a question—at least a question I often get asked—is, hold on...if Baptism is necessary for salvation, if God...if this verse that Peter's saying there doesn't mean that every religion is created equal and that they're all just different paths to God, but that Baptism really is for all, how do we deal with that question in light of the many peoples of the world who did not receive Baptism? Or for that matter, if Baptism is necessary for salvation, what about all of the saints of the Old Testament, obviously, who never even received Baptism.

In fact, this recently occurred to me, I'm not even sure if John the Baptist received Baptism. We know he baptized others, but who baptized him? So what do we make of that? And to answer that question, I would turn to the catechesis of the Church, to the doctrine of the Church in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. There's a very important text in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 1257 and following, that lays out very clearly this whole question of the necessity of Baptism for salvation, the question of exceptions from that necessity, and then also the implications for the mission of the Church to the nations. So I'll just bring this video to a close by reading those paragraphs and opening them up in light of what we see in the second reading today. In paragraph 1257, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* addresses the topic of the necessity of Baptism—meaning its necessity for salvation. And it says this:

The Lord himself affirms that Baptism is necessary for salvation.

And the quote it gives there in the footnote is John 3:5. That's when Jesus says, "Unless a man be born of water and spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." It's a pretty clear statement of its necessity. It says, it continues:

He also commands his disciples to proclaim the Gospel to all nations and to baptize them.

That's, of course, the great commission in Matthew 28.

Baptism is necessary for salvation for those to whom the Gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for this sacrament. The Church does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received from the Lord to see that all who can be baptized are "reborn of water and the Spirit." God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.

Very nuanced, very balanced statement there, very important qualification of the Church. So what does the Church say? Yes, Baptism is necessary for salvation, because Jesus said it's necessary for salvation. That's the first point. The second point is, however, it's important to keep in mind that it's only necessary for those who have the possibility to receive the sacrament and to whom the Gospel is proclaimed. In other words, not every single individual has the same access to the graces of that sacrament.

For example, everyone who lived during the period of the Old Testament did not have access to the grace of the sacrament because it hadn't been instituted yet. So obviously, God doesn't demand for salvation the impossible. He only requires Baptism for those for whom it is actually possible. They either have to have 1) heard the Gospel, and 2) have the possibility of asking for the sacrament.

And the Church will go on to give out different examples of that. So for example, in the early Church there was frequently a tradition of referring to Baptism of blood or Baptism of desire. So it would happen in times of persecution that someone would come to faith in Jesus Christ. They would believe in Him, they

would accept Him as their Savior, but they might be in prison at the time, and they might not have the chance to get baptized. The Church has always said that although God has bound the grace of the gift of the Holy Spirit to the sacrament of Baptism, He is not bound by the sacrament of Baptism. And so a person who dies with a desire for Baptism or a person who was martyred for Christ before they were baptized—that would be the Baptism of blood—the same graces of Baptism are given to them in advance, even apart from the sacrament, by virtue of their desire or by virtue of their martyrdom.

And what I love about this is that it might sound like, oh, the Church is like parsing things out or making exceptions. But the second reading for today, when you read it in its wider context, shows that isn't the case, because the first example of an exception to Baptism and God not being bound by the sacrament, is Cornelius and the other pagans with him, the other Gentiles, because they received the Holy Spirit and begin to speak in tongues even before they receive the sacrament of Baptism. In other words, they receive the same graces the apostles received at Pentecost before they even receive the waters of Baptism.

So in that very episode, God is showing that—through His own determination, through His own means—He can bestow graces wherever He wills. In this case, it's for the sake of showing Peter that the door is open to the Gentiles once and for all. He makes it very clear to him. But it also shows that God is not bound by His sacraments. So the ordinary way of forgiveness of sin and reception of the Holy Spirit is through the sacrament of Baptism, but God also has extraordinary means that are known to Him alone. However, the Church says:

[She] does not know of any means other than Baptism that assures entry into eternal beatitude; this is why she takes care not to neglect the mission she has received...

So the Church's mission is bring Baptism to everyone, because although God can save people in ways known to Himself alone outside the confines of the sacraments, the Church does not know how He does that, and the Church does not know that He does that for certain—except like in the case of Cornelius, where it's part of revealed Scripture.

So the mission of the Church always is to bring the Gospel, and not just to—from the beginning—not just to the people of Israel, but all the nations. And that's really what we're celebrating on the feast of Jesus' Baptism—the beginning of that gift of salvation that starts at Jesus' Baptism, is consummated on the cross, and then flows out to humanity through the sacrament.