

First Sunday after the Epiphany (Epiphany 1A) - January 12, 2014
Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

Christ's Baptism...Building the Bonds of a Common Humanity

On this First Sunday after the Epiphany we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, who stepped into the muddy Jordan River, marking the step from small town carpentry into a powerful public ministry—an important Epiphany moment. Now the four gospels all focus on the part of this event when Jesus came *out* of the water, where he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him, and the voice declaring, “This is my Son, the Beloved; with whom I am well pleased.”ⁱ

The other part of the scene—the actual baptism—a very human act of stepping *into* the muddy river—well, that is more or less mentioned by the gospels, but as a background event. The Gospel of John in fact doesn't mention it at all. Luke is very vague as to whether John the Baptist was even involved. Mark speaks of the baptism only in the most stark way—just a quick mention. And Matthew whose gospel we read today adds an interesting exchange in which John the Baptist is there, but tries to talk Jesus out of being baptized.

In spite of all that, what strikes me is that the strong gospel claims of Jesus' *divinity* are made precisely at the moment where Jesus shows his *humanity* most explicitly, getting in line along with a number of others, waiting his turn, and walking into the river. So, here's the question: what did Jesus need to be baptized for? What did the sinless, Beloved Son of God need from a baptism, especially one that John the Baptist was describing as a “baptism of repentance”? It was not being able to answer that question that led the gospel writers to stress the divine voice proclaiming a divine Son while putting the actual baptism in the background.

But let's try to get at an understanding of this question of why Jesus would seek out John to be baptized by him. Implied in his becoming human to begin with, Jesus' style was and always is to lead us from within and alongside our common humanity and to not go it alone nor to jettison his humanity. He led with his humanity, and through that, manifested his divinity. And so, Jesus does not begin his public ministry with some great miraculous manifestation or some kingly coronation. If he had, he would have succumbed to the temptation to be forever over us, above us, apart from us. But he did not. Instead he went into the water along with all the rest of us sinful, mortal, fallible, fragile humans who were seeking to repent and turn toward a new and hopeful and different way of living. Jesus who was without sin was baptized in the river to avoid the sin of standing above us, separate from us, and to turn toward us by coming up right alongside us.ⁱⁱ And so, the divine affirmation of Jesus as the beloved Son of God occurs at the precise moment when Jesus assumes his complete solidarity with our human

identity and condition in his baptism. It is interesting to note that later when Jesus is in hot water, as it were, with the authorities in Jerusalem who question his authority, he responds by referring to his baptism by John as the only source of his authority (Mark 11:28ff.).

In getting in line and then wading into the water along with the rest of us, Jesus revealed that his messianic mission meant not going it alone. And he reveals to us that our real identity is not on the edges of our existence where we can boast of our unique talents and qualities, privileges and powers. Rather, our real identity is in the center where we recognize and acknowledge our common humanity and equality in all our failing and falling and fallibility. And in that fundamental recognition our deepest sense of self can be found which includes the realization of our own beloved nature as God's sons and daughters, created and redeemed and restored in God's image. Then we can regard our unique talents and powers as spiritual gifts which Christ's Spirit freely offers to us to share, rather than as personal rewards for our own hard work or as badges of superiority. Or if we see ourselves as especially fallible, as I certainly do, or if we don't see ourselves as having many gifts, the more we may be able to recognize in our common humanity, the mutual support of one another, and the birthright gifts which the Holy Spirit does send to each and every one of us.ⁱⁱⁱ From the cradle to the grave, and beyond, Jesus knows what we face as human beings: He shows us how to live, and walks with us each step of the way. And he began all this by choosing the way of humanity, living and dying as one of us to carry out God's Divine purposes of unity and community.

As the baptism of Jesus was the moment in his life when he went public in his faith journey and discovered his public mission, so Baptism is how we go public as his followers. Now, the Church needs to say here that you can belong before you believe. I repeat, you can belong here before you believe! That makes us different than some churches or groups that say you have to believe this and this before you belong. This church is a community in which all are welcome—and is a community whose purpose for existence is *not* primarily for the benefit of its own members. That makes us soft around the edges, because we know we are solid at the core, as it were. Because we have our center in Christ, we can have few if any boundaries on who can belong; for if we belong to Christ, we belong to no one and nothing else; and yet, if we belong to Christ who shines forth God's purposes of wholeness, love, and justice to all, then we belong to everyone else in the human family, and to all of God's Creation. Again, that puts us in contrast with some communities of faith who act more like denominational bastions, private clubs or holy huddles, and that let you know just what you must believe before you can belong.

As Jesus' baptism revealed that he belonged to God and to our common humanity, our baptisms reveal that we belong to God and the Church and the whole human family through Jesus. And so, Baptism is first and foremost the affirmation of our common humanity with all others, in the Spirit of Jesus' own

baptism, as Peter testifies in our second reading from Acts. Only then is it incorporation into the particular community called the Christian church. Fundamentally Jesus has come to build the bonds of our common humanity more so than collecting us into groupings of Christianity.^{iv}

And so, as a formal rite of already belonging, when you are baptized, you aren't just baptized as a member of this parish, nor are you just baptized Episcopalian or into the Anglican Communion! No, when you are baptized, you are baptized into Christ and His Universal Church, an expansive family, the world-wide church—in order to build the bonds of our common humanity. And that means you can take your baptism with you wherever you go in life, to other church settings you may encounter on your journey, and into the wider community.

So, in Baptism we are formally commissioned and anointed with the power and Spirit of God to go forth and join Christ in his ongoing mission of repairing the world and restoring all in right relationship. Having said that, we need to think and pray and grapple with how we as followers of Christ go forth in that purpose and mission as a church in relation to the rest of the world, as we walk the road toward broader and deeper relationships that go beyond “inclusiveness” and head toward a true *pluralism*; that is, as we hold a fundamental respect and regard for other religious traditions as being valid and authentic expressions of faith and hope and love in themselves, and thus need not be “completed” by our Christianity. Of course, as a parish church our public worship expresses our Christ-centered tradition and Episcopal Church customs, while also working to eliminate, and more carefully interpret, language that is disparaging of non-Christians, or that appears to promulgate the erroneous view that Christianity is the “highest,” “best,” or “only true religion,” or the equally erroneous view that Christianity is the “completion of” or “supersedes,” or will eventually “conquer” or “enfold” any and all other faith traditions.^v And certainly other faith traditions have similar homework to do as we Christians do. Nevertheless, our faith journey as a Christian church is one that strives to be expressive of both our Christ-centered Anglican/Episcopal tradition *and* the broader horizons of an ecumenical and interfaith commitment to God.

Finally, one of the most powerful things I say in our public liturgy happens just after each person's baptism when I press anointed oil on my thumb and with that make the sign of the cross on the forehead of the baptized and say, “You are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own forever.” That part of the service, called the Chrism, sets forth an invisible seal of identity—of being “marked as Christ's own forever.” That doesn't mean that it is some sort of magic talisman that will protect the baptized from all harm, or that it is some secret pass to all the privileges of being in some select club or group of the “chosen ones.” Rather, it does mean that we are never totally alone no matter where we find ourselves—and so it means we never have to go it alone. It means we are forever in Christ and with Christ, understanding again that if we belong to Christ, we belong to no one and nothing else; and yet, if we belong to Christ,

then we belong to everyone else in the human family and God's creation. It is God in Christ who will complete us, not Christianity. We are not saved by our theology, or our baptism. It is God alone who saves us. And until that day of divine completion, there is spacious room for many different expressions of faith, hope, and love that shine forth in the rainbow spectrum of God's light to the world.

ⁱ Today is the first Sunday in the Epiphany season. Epiphany, from the Greek compound word *epiphaine* meaning to "shine forth," is the celebration of the "shining forth" or the manifestation of God's being and purpose in Jesus. For what would become the Eastern Orthodox churches, the manifestation of the power and love of God was focused early on on the Epiphany event of Jesus' baptism, which marked the beginning of his empowered public ministry. Other manifestations in this Epiphany tradition and season include, of course, the visit of the wise men, but also the boy Jesus at age 12 in the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus' first miracle at a wedding in the town of Cana, and the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor.

ⁱⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, Mixed Blessings (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998), pp. 59-60

ⁱⁱⁱ See Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Year B)

^{iv} And because we say you can belong here before you believe, that means even babies who can't exactly say what they believe, can belong, and the same with the rest of you. Baptism, then, is the formal and public act of belonging—formal in that you already belong, but now it's official, as it were—and public, because when you are baptized it's not just into some idea of the church, but the actual flesh and blood church of real people that you are baptized into. Baptism is not a private family affair as it had at one time become.

And just know that Baptism is, as the Archbishop of Canterbury put it, an incorporation "into solidarities not of your own choosing." The humanity with whom Jesus so identified and was so publicly baptized into and alongside—and the community that Jesus gathered and consecrated himself—were paradoxical because, they embraced all that we usually try to shut out from our relationships, including ignorance, fear, betrayal, violence and death. It is some form of betrayal and/or death that ends every relationship and shakes the foundation of any community. With Judas present in the core of Jesus' community, along with all the rest of the disciples who would also forsake Jesus and flee, the church that Jesus formed, from the beginning took within itself treachery, fear, divisiveness, betrayal and death. No wonder the Church around the world and over the centuries has been, and still is the refuge of some pretty unsavory characters – present company excluded of course! It was so from the beginning. That is why it is the community in which we can all belong. On this day we remember that we are limbs and parts of a body that has died and lives forever – the living Jesus who formed a community for saints and sinners – the Church, the Body of Christ – of which he is still the head and we, who are many, are one body and individually, members one of another through baptism (Romans 12:5).

^v And so, let us be curious about other faiths and other cultures. God has something in mind and is doing for us what we do not know. God is mingling us together for reasons beyond our ken; so, let us be tolerant and patient so that we can begin a deeper journey of openness and embrace of those not like us. God is reuniting long-stranded pools of human and faith groupings into the ocean of His loving purposes of union and communion of all humankind and all Creation.