



## **Baptism of the Lord**

### **Homily**

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Sunday 13 January 2019  
St Mary's Cathedral, Perth

The feast of the Lord's baptism which we celebrate today, no doubt brings to the minds of many of us the importance of baptism in our Catholic tradition. It is understandable, of course, that we would link Christian baptism to Christ's baptism. Today in the Sistine Chapel in Rome, for example, Pope Francis, following a long tradition, will baptise a number of infants and will reflect on the significance of both the baptism of Jesus and the baptism which all Christians experience at the beginning of their journey of faith.

In spite of this it is important to remember that what we recall and celebrate today is the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Jesus could not himself receive Christian baptism because, in its deepest meaning, Christian baptism, yours and mine, was an experience of being united with Christ in his death to sin and his rising to new life. It was the beginning of our relationship with Christ, a relationship which grows and deepens as we travel the journey of our lives. For Jesus to receive Christian baptism would have made no sense at all.

John's baptism, the baptism which Jesus undergoes in the River Jordan, was a baptism of repentance. In John's mind it was a physical gesture which expressed the willingness of the person being baptised to repent of his or her sin and prepare themselves for the coming of the messiah. As John himself said, *"I baptise you with water but one who is coming after me will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"*.

John himself recognises that rather than baptising Jesus he should be baptised by Jesus. But Jesus insists. *"Let it be this way"* he says - and John goes ahead. Jesus knows that he has been sent by the Father in order to enter into the reality, the broken reality, of people's lives and to offer healing and new life to them through his presence, his teaching, his suffering and death and his rising to new life. He wants his people to know that he is one of them, that he shares their struggles and their suffering, and so, even though he has no sin of his own of which he must repent, he identifies with them by receiving the same baptism of repentance that they have received from John. This identification of the sinless one with us who are the sinful ones will reach its culmination on the cross when Jesus takes on himself, and in dying and rising takes away, our sins and the sins of all the world. This is exactly what we proclaim at every Mass when the priest shows the Consecrated Host to us and says, *"Behold the Lamb of God - behold him who takes away the sins of the world"*.

The feast we celebrate today then is the feast of the manifestation, the making-known, of the true purpose of the coming of the Lord Jesus among us. He comes to us as our saviour, as the healer



of our brokenness, as the restorer of the fullness of life which was and is God's gift to us but which we have so often dishonoured or disfigured.

Perhaps this is the great challenge and the great opportunity of today's feast: as we reflect on Jesus being plunged into the water by John, we might see it as a sign of Jesus entering into the depths of our own sinfulness - a sinfulness which we need the honesty and courage to acknowledge. And then, as Jesus emerges from the river, with the water flowing from him, we might catch a glimpse of the hope which is there for each of us: that we can be set free from all that is holding us back from being the people God is calling us to be.

St Thomas Aquinas, one of the great saints of our Catholic tradition, captured all this very beautifully in a prayer which he prayed before coming to Mass and receiving Holy Communion. Perhaps this prayer can help us to celebrate today's feast a little better, and to understand who it is whose baptism we celebrate today:

Almighty, everlasting God, behold, I approach the Sacrament of your only-begotten Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. I come as one sick to the doctor who will save my life, as one unclean to the fountain of mercy, as one blind to the radiance of eternal light, as one poor and needy to the Lord of heaven and earth; praying that in your boundless generosity you will cure my sickness, wash away my defilement, enlighten my blindness, enrich my poverty and clothe my nakedness.

May this be our prayer today, and every day as we continue the journey of discipleship of Jesus which began, for each of us, on the day of our own baptism.