

January 11, 2015 - Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

Why would Jesus feel the need to be baptized? It couldn't be that he felt the need to be cleansed from sin; he didn't have any sin. Perhaps, and this is an intriguing possibility, Jesus decided to enter more deeply into the human condition. And now was the time to do just that. He was sinless, but he goes through the same ritual that others are doing as well. He participates in this moment of repentance and conversion not because he needs it, but because it aligns him with those around him. It's an act of solidarity from the Son of God, who casts his lot with the people of his time. At his baptism, Jesus was taking sides with us. He doesn't carry original sin, but we do. And still, Jesus feels the need to stand in line with us.

Scholars often talk about Jesus as "taking on" the sins of humanity. What might this mean? Perhaps we can compare Jesus' sense of sin to the shame that parents might feel if their child were guilty of criminal behavior. There's no sin on the parents' part, but they often feel the weight of the suffering that was caused by their child.

Since the baptism of Jesus showed his willingness to stand with the outcast and the disinherited, it's time for God to show that there's a new possibility of communication between humanity and God. First, the heavens are torn open, then the dove-like descent of the Spirit, and finally the voice: "You are my beloved Son' with you I am well pleased."

Interestingly, the divine voice identifies Jesus in three ways that would have been familiar to the early church: "My Son" reminds people of King David, who was thought of as God's Son: the "beloved" reminds people of Abraham's son Isaac who was called the "beloved son"; and the one with whom God is "well pleased" echoes a line from the prophet Isaiah describing "God's servant."

All of this lovely stuff might call out to us in two ways. First, Jesus knows our weaknesses. No matter how often we pray, how many spiritual exercises we make, or how hard we try, we still sin. It's not that we are notorious sinners perhaps. But we continually bump up against our sinfulness. Jesus knows and feels our sinfulness, stands with us in our need, and desires to forgive and heal us.

Finally, we stand with Jesus, because of our baptisms, as God's beloved sons and daughters. No one should be allowed to take that identity away from us, or deface it, or make us ashamed of it. Our mission is to grow into our baptisms, making the world holy by our holy lives. We can be no more than that; we should never be anything less.