

Baptism Of The Lord (C)

- When I was growing up, my parish, St. Mary's, East St. Kilda, had a large marble baptismal font in a room off the side of the Church.
- St. Mary's was no different from any other Church at that time.
- The baptismal fonts were out of the way, very often behind an iron grill.
- In many European cathedrals the baptistery was even a separate building.
- When a baby was born, the parents & godparents would bring the baby to the Church on a Sunday afternoon with no one present except the priest.
- Back in those days baptism was almost totally identified with taking away original sin. While that was & is true, it is only one part of the sacrament & often a misunderstood part.
- The emphasis on original sin originated with St. Augustine during the fifth century. But what did baptism mean before that?
- What did Jesus mean when he told his disciples to go out & baptize in the Name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit?
- Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus.
- What was this baptism of Jesus? Why was Jesus baptized?
- It is problematic if we think of Baptism in terms of the washing away of original sin, because Jesus was sinless. What was it then?
- It was a public sign, a public sign of Jesus being sent forth by God to do God's work. This had been prophesied by the prophet Isaiah: *"Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased; Upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations."*
- And Luke describes the fulfillment of this prophecy when Jesus was baptized, "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased."
- The whole reason for the baptism of Jesus was not for himself or for his own religious or spiritual good; but for the purpose of empowering him & sending him forth to do God's work of service for the good of others.
- Like that of Jesus, our baptism is also a public sign, a public sign that we are called & chosen & sent forth to do God's work of service for the good of others.
- Our baptism is at once a commission from God to this work of service & a commitment from us to do exactly that throughout our whole Christian lives - our baptismal certificate is in reality a work permit.
- So, it can be said that like Jesus we are baptized primarily not for our own sake but for the sake of others; in order to be apostles & witnesses to them; in order to work publicly, as Isaiah says, for freedom & justice in the world. Baptism is simply so that, like Jesus, as St. Peter says, we can go about doing good works.
- Baptism becomes a force moving us out to active involvement in the world; Baptism becomes entirely a call to action, entirely outward-directed & altruistic & service-oriented.
- So 1) Baptism is an initiation into a community of people who claim that their

relationship with God directs the way they live their lives; 2) it is a call to discipleship; & 3) it is a commissioning.

- Initiation into a community with a mission, call & commissioning.
- During the Initiation rite a significant number of the group meets to witness & welcome the renewal of the group through the initiation of new members.
- It would be odd for someone to be initiated into a group with few members of the group present; yet, that is what happened for centuries regarding baptism; therefore the baptismal fonts were moved from side rooms to the front of the Church or to the main entrances of the Church.
- Many parishes celebrate baptisms during a Sunday Mass.
- Regardless of how a parish organizes its celebration of baptism, it is clear that there is no such creature as a private baptism.
- The second point is that baptism is a call to discipleship.
- In the early days of the Church this call was so serious that people who were not born into Christian families spent years preparing to enter the Church.
- Back in those days to be baptized was to be counter cultural; to accept the God's call to discipleship meant to live different from the rest of the world.
- It meant a commitment to holiness.
- Somehow or other, much of this was lost as the centuries progressed.
- As the centuries rolled on the notion that the baptized were called to a radical life was submerged; the sacrament was reduced to a fixation on original sin.
- Baptism became more of a spiritual vaccination to get rid of something rather than a call & an empowerment to be something.
- That is the reason why members of our parish hold baptismal preparation evenings for new parents to alert them that their child's baptism is not just an erasing of original sin but a call to discipleship.
- By having their children baptised, parents are taught that they are taking upon themselves the responsibility to raise disciples for Christ.
- Finally, baptism is not just a christening, it is a commissioning.
- The baptized are called to ministry, to do the work of God.
- All of us, not just priests, all of us are commissioned through our baptism to be representatives of Jesus; all of us were chosen by God for his mission.
- Baptism means for us exactly what it meant for Jesus that day he stepped into the River Jordan & was washed by John.
- He was beginning his public life, his mission.
- His baptism was his initiation, his entrance into that mission.
- He emerged from the water commissioned by the Father to do his work.
- In the waters of baptism we have been initiated, called & commissioned.
- We have been initiated into a worldwide people, called to discipleship & commissioned to ministry – may you hear God speak to you: *"You are my Beloved in whom I am well pleased. Go & be my disciples"*.