

01/08/2006 – 1st Sunday after Epiphany – Mark 1:7-11 – Fulfilling all Righteousness

This morning, the 1st Sunday after Epiphany, we focus our attention on the events surrounding Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in the river Jordan, and His manifestation of Himself to the world in public ministry. Let us insure that we clearly understand the setting of Our Gospel reading today as we consider this epiphany of Our Lord. On the day when Jesus was to be revealed as the Messiah, to be anointed by the Holy Spirit to carry out and accomplish the Father's work of redeeming the world as the Lamb of God, He came to John to be baptized by him in the Jordan River. In the wilderness, that place where God constantly calls His people to meet Him, John was actively preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins - to prepare people to receive the Messiah when He appeared upon the scene. John's Baptism was for those who acknowledged themselves as sinners. He baptized *only* those who repented of their sins. He would not baptize the Pharisees nor the Sadducees who appeared religious on the outside, but showed no fruits of repentance, to those who said within themselves, '*We have Abraham as our father*'. *Everyone* needed this baptism, even John himself. From the most wretched to the most pious persons on earth, all were equally sinful before God.

I want you to realize that this was not a common scene in Israel, this call of *individuals* to a baptism for the repentance of sin. Baptism was required of proselytes who came into Judaism for it was assumed that a sin-stained, polluted Gentile had need to be baptized, but as a son of Abraham, as a member of the chosen people, it was thought that salvation was already assured. For themselves, the Jewish nation related to baptism as pertaining to the pouring of water during ceremonial purification or in the ordination of a priest, such as the sons of Aaron in Leviticus 16:4. But John was preaching that *all* needed to repent of their sins and be baptized. And then, that day, standing before him, John beheld He who was without sin and tried to dissuade Him from being baptized. But Jesus knew why He had left heaven and come to earth, why He had become incarnate and would not be deterred.

There is the misconception, I believe, amongst many Christians, that the Lord Jesus became our sin-bearer as He went to the cross. Now understand, I would be the last person to deny the bearing of our sins by Christ on the cross. If you deny *that* you place yourself among the

realm of heretics; but it is a mistake, a grave shortsightedness, to think He commenced the bearing of our sins at the cross. Christ was and is our sin-bearer from first to last, the Alpha and Omega of our faith. He went to the cross and paid the ultimate price precisely because He was *already* one with His people. He was *already* in the covenant relationship with us by the very fact of His incarnation. This was the eternal purpose of God in Christ. You must grab hold of the truth that Jesus Christ, the Son of the Living God, the Second Person of the Trinity, *became man*, and thus in all He did He identified with us, even to the point of submitting Himself to the baptism of John for the repentance of sins. The Son of God became man. The importance of that element of our belief can never be overstated. However, I sense, for most Christians, the difficulty is not in acknowledging Jesus as God, walking on water, performing miracles, raising Lazarus from the dead, but rather in relating to Him as a man.

John's baptism required a true repentance from sin from the person being baptized – but the Lord was completely sinless – in nature, in birth, in His dispositions, in His will, His thoughts, His words and His deeds. He was sinless in His purposes and attitudes and in all His relationships - to God, to the Holy Law of God and in all His relationships with man. He was man, but He was also God the Son. The entire testimony of scriptures is to His sinlessness, and yet the very first thing He did in His public ministry was to submit Himself to John's Baptism of repentance for sin. That is the reason John the Baptist was shocked, why he protested '*I have need to be baptized of You*'. Yes, even he, the forerunner of the Messiah, the voice crying in the wilderness, the one that Isaiah prophesized about, had not grasped the depths of the plan of redemption. How could he baptize the sinless one with such a baptism? Jesus' reply said it all - '*to fulfill all righteousness*'

Jesus understood that in order to take away the sin of the world, He had to be burdened with the sin of the world. And so, He, the obedient Son, the suffering servant, allowed Himself to be baptized by John, and the sin of the world was laid upon Him. Your sins, my sins, the sins of mankind were laid upon Him at His Baptism. As man He was immediately anointed with the Holy Spirit and God proclaimed His pleasure in the obedience of the Son. And from that time forward, Jesus identified Himself with sinners. He identified Himself with you and with me. He Himself was no sinner, but at His Baptism our sins were laid

upon Him, in order that He could pay the wages of sin and atone for them on the cross. The epiphany that occurred at Jesus' Baptism was that here was God in the flesh, the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, being burdened with our sins in order to take them to the cross and atone for them. At His Baptism, the whole weight of what we read in our Old Testament Lesson today from Isaiah 42, was laid upon Him.

Baptism is a pledge, a covenant. Jesus' baptism was part of His righteous obedience to God and to His Law. It was part of that great undertaking, the new covenant He had made from all eternity. He delighted always to do God's will, to obey His Law that was written in His heart. His being baptized was as much a redemptive act as His going to the cross, as being buried in the tomb, as rising from the dead - as the one whom God had appointed to be the Head and the Savior of His people. There He stood that day, before John the Baptist and God ready to fulfill the covenant wherein He had promised to be our High Priest. Consider what it means to be the High Priest, what it means that He was to be identified with His people, His oneness with them, He the Head and His people the body. When He became man, every power, all His might, all His authority was subservient to God, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, for the accomplishment of our salvation. II Corinthians 5:21 tells us that *'He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.'* Made sin for us, what does that mean? Personal sin, that of which you and I are all partakers, refers to an internal nature, a deficiency in our character. Of this, Christ has no part in Himself. But as our representative before God, as the captain of our salvation, He has our sin imputed to Him just as His righteousness shall be imputed to us if we are one with Him. It does not mean that Christ shares personally in the sins of men, but that the guilt of their sins are set to His account, that He is responsible to bare its penalty, and to do so as both man and God. It is the judicial act of God by which the sins of Christ's people are laid to His charge.

But this does not imply in any way that He does not feel our sins, that He can not relate to them. *'Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God ... For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin'* (Hebrews

4:14, 15). He has identified Himself with us completely; He has become one with us. He did not remain distant in the heavens, removed, aloof, but has become flesh and blood, has taken upon Himself a human body and walked among us. His desires are with the sons of men. He is mindful of us. He has visited us. This is the Christ we hear speaking throughout the Old Testament. The suffering servant who has identified with His people to the point that He considers their sins, His. In Psalm 40 He calls them *His* iniquities. They are ‘my’ iniquities says Christ and I’m going to pay for them – such is His identification with us. He who spoke in Psalm 69:21 *‘They gave me also gall for my meat; and in my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink’* is the same one who said in verse 5 *‘my sins are not hid from thee.’* ‘My sins, My sins’ – Do not entertain for even a moment any thought that Christ did not truly enter into, did not fully bear the sins of mankind, that His identification with our sins was not absolutely and totally a reality. If we could but even minutely and feebly plummet the depth of meaning, the depth of the love exhibited, the magnitude of the suffering, that Jesus Christ the creator of all things experienced by becoming man and taking our sins upon Himself, of being forsaken of the Father as He hung there on the cross as the propitiation, the eternal substitute for our sins.

We are to think of Jesus, not as an individual man, doing all He did for Himself, but as our representative. By identifying with Christ in baptism, we affirm in faith that the sacrificial death of Christ was for us, was on our behalf, and that we were in Him, and hence we died in Him. As many of you as have been baptized have proclaimed in so doing that you are dead to the world, and we have come forth into a new life. Your fleshly desires are henceforth to be viewed as dead. The Holy Spirit has wrought in you a new nature, and though you are in the world, you are not of it, a new man or woman, "created anew in Christ Jesus." This is the statement which your baptism avows to all, that Christ died and rose again, and that as part of His body, you too have died and will rise again in Him. Out of this doctrine grows death unto sin and life unto God, and you should desire that by every action and every aspect of your life to teach it to all who see you, for Christ’s sake.

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