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Baptism and Righteousness

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Baptism and Righteousness

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The Baptism of the Lord

Sunday Readings for January 12, 2014 for Cycle A:

Is 42:1-9; Ps 29; Acts 10:34-38; Mt 3:13-17

BAPTISM AND RIGHTEOUSNESS

Lawrence E. Frizzell

What do we know about John the Baptist? Besides the accounts in the Gospels and Acts of his work to prepare people for the coming of the Messiah, the Jewish historian Josephus (born A.D. 37) offered a brief account of his public life and death.

"To some Jews the destruction of Herod's army (by the forces of Aretas, king of Petra) seemed to be divine vengeance, and certainly a just vengeance, for his treatment of John, surnamed the Baptist. For Herod had him put to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice toward their fellows and piety toward God, and so doing join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behavior..." (Jewish Antiquities XVIII 5.2 #116-117).

Probably Josephus was drawing on reminiscences of people contemporary with John, showing the remarkable impression that John made as a teacher. His eloquence and influential leadership were the reasons that Josephus gave for Herod's demand that he be executed. The Gospels stress, more precisely, that he died for his witness to the divine laws concerning marriage.

A similar emphasis concerning interior conversion was already integrated into the worship of the Qumran community, which produced the "Dead Sea scrolls". Any hypocrite belonging to the group "shall not be reckoned among the perfect. He shall neither be purified by atonement, nor cleansed by purifying waters, nor sanctified by seas and rivers, nor washed clean by any ablution. Unclean, unclean shall he be!" (Community Rule III: 3-5). The state of sinfulness is a spiritual leprosy (see Lv 13:45) that makes a mockery of the person's involvement in religious rituals. The link between worship and daily life, taught by prophets and sages of ancient Israel, was a central focus among religious teachers in the late Second Temple period. Of course, such a message is never heard too often! Thus does the Church bring the teachings of John to our attention each year.

The righteous life to which John called his listeners had two aspects: justice in human relationships and piety in divine worship. The proper interior disposition implied an openness to God, who uses signs to educate people concerning divine gifts. Did Josephus understand that "right behavior" itself brought forgiveness, or was he adapting his report to the limited understanding of his pagan readers?

The Gospel reports that John admonished the people to produce good fruit as the evidence of their sincere repentance (Mt 3:8). When Jesus joined those seeking baptism, John protested that he

should be baptized by the Nazarene. John had declared already: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Mt 3:11). But Jesus explained that "it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness" (3:15). To fulfil the Law and the Prophets (5:17), Jesus wanted to identify himself with a sinful humanity in need of righteousness as a divine gift. He thus accepted the work of John to show his obedience to the heavenly Father.

The New Testament shows that Jesus' ministry begins with a manifestation of the Spirit and a hearing of the Father's Word. Mark made clear that Jesus is the beneficiary of this experience (1:9-11); Matthew probably recorded the statement, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (3:17), as addressed to Christian community listening to the Gospel.

As Son of the God, Jesus is committed totally to the right order demanded by the divine will. Thus he rejected the easy road suggested in the diabolical temptations (Mt 1:1-11) and persevered in spite of sorrow and distress (26:38). "My Father, if it possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will" (26:39).

Jesus offered an example of righteousness in his baptism and ministry that became the pattern for his disciples. He asked the sons of Zebedee: "Can you drink the cup that I am going to drink?" (Mt 20:22). Like Peter, they would learn in Gethsemane that prayer was needed to sustain their commitment. Too fatigued to join Jesus in his prayer (26:36-46), they eventually did accept the service of his death. "The Son of man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (20:28). On this feast and in daily life, we express gratitude for the way in which our baptism has integrated us into the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' death-and-resurrection.