

The Feast for the Baptism of the Christ

Joshua 3:1-3, 7-8, 13-1

There the people stood, about to enter the promised land; and there, before them, lay the river Jordan.

The people had been there once before, about to enter the land God had promised that He would give to them. And they had failed to enter; their faith had failed. Their fear of the people in the land was greater than their trust in God, and they had been too afraid to act on His promises and go forward in faith.

They should have known better. After all, they had seen the mighty works of God when He brought them up out of Egypt. But faced with real danger they forgot that God is real, and that His promise pertains to real life, also, that He really will bring His good will about for all who entrust themselves to Him, in life and death, and that what is good for us is always for His will to be done.

The people had refused to take possession of the promised land. And the judgement of God had fallen upon them. For the judgement of God is upon all unbelief. And ultimately, all sin is unbelief, failure to trust in God, that what He commands and what He promises is always ultimately what is good and right, and good for us. *Not one of these men of this evil generation shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers, such was the judgement, and as for your little ones, who you said would become a prey, and your children, who today have no knowledge of good or evil, they shall go in there. To them I will give it, and they shall possess it. But as for you, turn, and journey into the wilderness in the direction of the Red Sea.* And the people had wandered in the wilderness, homeless, for another forty years, until the generation had died out that had refused to take possession of what God had promised. Now only their children were left, to whom God had given His promise, when they had no knowledge of good and evil, that they should inherit the land; well, them and Caleb and Joshua, the few faithful of the faithless generation. And so it was time for the people to take possession of the promised land.

And there, before them, lay the river Jordan, preventing their passage to the promised land.

Once before the people had stood before a body of water, also, caught between death and death, the Red Sea before them and the Egyptian army approaching from behind.

And God had parted the waters before the people and let them walk through on dry ground. And He had let the water come together again behind them, and the approaching enemies had drowned and died. *For the Lord is good, as the Psalm says it, which also says that His steadfast love endures for ever, and His faithfulness to all generations.* And now He would show His goodness and His faithfulness to yet another generation by a sign similar to that by which He had saved their fathers. *Today I will begin to exalt you in the sight of all Israel,* He said to Joshua, *that they may know that, as I was with Moses, so I will be with you. When the soles of the feet of the priests bearing the Ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off from flowing, and the waters coming down from above shall stand in one heap.* And as the Lord said, so it was. As had the Red Sea, so the river Jordan yielded to the Ark of the Lord, so that the priests could walk through on dry ground, carrying the Ark of the Lord, and the people could follow the Ark of the Lord and walk through, also, once again, on dry ground.

Now, the Ark of the Lord, or the Ark of the Covenant, contained the two tablets of stone God had given Moses with the Ten Commandments. The roof of Ark of the Covenant was the *mercy seat* with the statues God had had Moses make of two *Cherubim*, that is: two mighty guardian angels, like those God had set to guard the Garden of Eden with their flaming swords, so that sinners would not have access to the tree of life. It was called the *mercy seat*, or the *throne of grace*, because the blood of the atoning sacrifice was to be sprayed upon it every year on the great day of atonement, and God would have mercy on His people and forgive their sins by means of the atoning sacrifice. The Ark of the Covenant was the heart of the Tabernacle, the sanctuary of God. In it dwelt the very glory of God, as Holy Scripture says it. So when the Ark of the Lord went through the river Jordan, and the people followed, God Himself went through, and it was God Himself the people followed.

Of this we hear today, on the Feast for the Baptism of our Lord Jesus; for He is the true dwelling place of the glory of God, and the true mercy seat and throne of grace, and the true atoning sacrifice by which God forgives the sin of His people, and of all sinners. And He has gone through that which separated us from the gifts of God and laid a path open for us. He has gone into the waters of Baptism in order for us to follow Him to the promised land.

In the beginning was the Word, says Holy Scripture, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and set up His sanctuary among us. In our Lord Jesus God Himself has come to us with His glory, the Son of God, who is Himself God from eternity. In Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, as the holy Apostle Paul writes it, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself.

In His Baptism the glory of God once again descended into the river Jordan. This time, though, the waters did not yield to Him in order for Him to go through unhindered. He sank into the waters, and the waters closed over Him. For through Him God was pleased to reconcile Himself to all things, and to make a way for us sinners through that which separates us from what God wishes and wills to give to us.

Our sin is what separates us from the blessed presence of God, His Kingdom and His heavenly life, our sin and His the righteous wrath against it, His holy hatred of evil. *For God is light, as He has had His holy Apostle John write it, and in Him is no darkness at all. And if we say we have communion with Him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not do the truth.* The goodness of God cannot have communion with evil; He cannot and will not have evil in Him. In the light of His goodness and glory all darkness must die. And all sin must be judged and damned to utter and eternal death by His goodness, His rightful wrath against wrong and wrongdoing, His holy hatred of evil.

But the Son of God, who is the Holy One of God, and God Himself from eternity, in whom is no darkness, no sin, no evil, He had Himself baptised with the Baptism of sinners to take our sin upon Himself and bear it for us, and His judgement against it. And this He did for love of us, for our salvation. As He has had His holy Apostle Paul write it: *Him who knew of no sin God made to be sin for us in order that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*

He was baptised into our death that we might not perish and die in His judgement but rather live and be with Him forever in glory. By being baptised into us He made Himself one with us in our sin in order that we, being baptised into Him, might be made one with Him in His righteousness, that is: His goodness and innocence before God,

And so far does His goodness outweigh the evil of our sin, that even as He came up from being baptised into our sin, the Father would declare of Him that *this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.*

His Baptism was a Baptism death, though, and eternal death at that. *I have a Baptism with which to be baptised, He would say of His death, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished.* And baptised into our sin He would die in the greatest distress of all, in His own judgement against sin, His holy hatred of evil, utter, and thus eternal, death and damnation. But so far did His goodness outweigh the evil of our sin that the Father would raise Him from death and so declare of Him, once again, that *this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,* and that His death was pleasing to Him, also, and a sufficient sacrifice for the sin of the world, sufficient for the salvation of all sinners, which was always His will and pleasure.

It was the will of the Lord to crush Him, as God had spoken by His Prophet Isaiah; He has put Him to grief; when His soul makes an offering for guilt, He shall see His offspring; He shall prolong His days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in His hand. Out of the anguish of His soul He shall see and be satisfied; by His knowledge shall the righteous one, my Servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and He shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide Him a portion with the many and He shall divide the spoil with the strong, because He poured out His soul to death and was numbered with transgressors.

In His sufferings and death His Baptism was brought to completion, and the eternal will of God, which is our salvation. As the Letter to the Hebrews writes it, *He is the Mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.* By His Baptism He, in whom all the glory of God dwells, has gone before us and made a path for us, through Baptism, to the promised land, where God would have us, His glorious Kingdom and His heavenly life. He has gone through death and judgement for us, so that the path lies open for us to go through on dry ground, unhindered and unharmed. He has taken away that which stood in the way of us taking possession of what it was from eternity the wish and will of God to give to us. In Him God has made us to be what it was His eternal will for us to be, holy and blameless before Him, conformed to the image of His beloved Son with whom He was always well pleased, who had Himself baptised into us, and us into Himself, and has had us made one with Him in all that He is, and all that is His, so that we are now God's beloved children with whom He is well pleased, and as such we shall be with Him forever, in the fullness of His goodness and His glory.

Glory be to God on High, and on earth peace, good will toward men! Amen.