

The Feast for the Baptism of Our Lord

Mark 1:4-11

Did we not just hear that? That *John came baptising in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins?* Well, it is not all that long ago that we last heard it; although, when we last heard it, we heard it under another agenda. During Advent we were being called to prepare ourselves for the coming of the Christ by cleansing our lives of all that might stand in the way of us being found to be right with Him, and righteous, when He comes to judge, all sinful behaviours and attitudes, all that may have made us to turn away from His salvation, or lose sight of it, or might make us to in future, all disobedience and defiance that might harden our hearts in ungodliness, all false beliefs that might confuse us and lead us into unbelief.

Well, we are we still being called to do that even today, to repent and abandon all ungodliness, for we are always called to do that, all year long, although, again, our agenda today is a different one. For it is. Today the calendar of the Church has us celebrate the Feast for the Baptism of our Lord, which means, as we sang it earlier, that *this is the Feast of victory for our God*, that is: the feast for our salvation. But then again, the salvation of God is what the Church of Christ always celebrates, and His Christians, when we come together for worship, just as we are always called to repent and turn away from all ungodliness.

As the Church of Christ, and as His Christians, we always live simultaneously in celebration and repentance. We worship in *repentant joy*, as one of our orders of worship says it. While all Christians always know and acknowledge that we are poor and miserable sinners, and anyone who does not acknowledge that is *not* a Christian, and that by our specific sins as well as by our sinfulness we gravely offend God and justly deserve His temporal and eternal punishment, we always rejoice, also, that out of His great goodness and mercy we are righteous and right with Him, and at the most awful cost to Himself, what the Son has suffered for our salvation. And, in fact, the awareness of the severity of our sin is exactly what makes us to understand and appreciate just how good God is, and to honour Him and His goodness as it is good and right, and as He would have it. As He has had His holy Apostle Paul write it, *where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more*.

Not that sin in itself is a good thing, for it is not; but since sin is our given reality, for sin to be exposed for the evil reality that it is means for the goodness of God to be made manifest only all the more, and the glory of His salvation. Whenever a Christian is made aware just how evil his sin is, and his sinfulness, what it makes him to see is just how good God is, that He has had mercy, and still has, upon a sinner such as myself, who really is a sinner, and whose sin really is evil, that *God is good to the unthankful and evil*, as our Lord Jesus has said it.

This might seem somewhat strange when we think too much about it; and outsiders and unbelievers will sometimes argue against the Lutheran faith, which really is nothing other than the common Christian faith taught by Holy Scripture, that it must be confusing to constantly have to bounce from grieving for our sin to celebrating our salvation. For those who actually live it it is not, though, at least it is not when we do not confuse ourselves and complicate things by thinking too much about things and insisting on analysing and understanding everything instead of being content to humble ourselves before God and accept His judgement against our sin and sinfulness, and joyfully to receive and rejoice in His Word of love, of what His love has done for us, and what His love gives to us. We are not practising one religion when we acknowledge our sinfulness and sins, and another when we rejoice in our salvation, nor are we bouncing from one reality to another; it is not that we come to Church as heathens, under the judgement and damnation of God, and confess our sins and have our sins forgiven and then leave as beloved children of God, and are that for a while, until the salvation of God we have received runs out, or we sin again, and we have to hope that it will not be too long after a Sunday that we die, or the Lord comes to judge. No, as baptised children of God, and believers, we live all our life, with our sinfulness and our sinning under His mercy, with our sins forgiven, fully and for real, dealt with and done away with with what our Saviour suffered for us.

At any rate, it is not that long ago that we heard about what we hear today, about John the Baptist, that *John came baptising in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*. But as we hear it already again today, we hear it under another agenda; rather than repentance, our focus is a festive one today. Our awareness of being poor and miserable sinners who by our sin have gravely offended God and justly deserved His temporal and eternal punishment, though not forgotten, is put in the background a bit today.

This is the way of the calendar of the Church.

Again, we are not practising different religions or presented with different realities from one Sunday to the next, as little as a Lutheran Pastor will preach one religion one Sunday and another the next; rather, throughout the year we have one and the same reality presented to us, of sin and salvation, although with different aspects of the same precious Truth of the salvation of God being front and centre. So there is that.

And so we hear it again, that *John came baptising in the wilderness and preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins*; more importantly, though, we hear that it came to pass that *He came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan*, of whom John had said that *I indeed baptised you with water, but He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit*.

He came to be baptised with sinners, whose Spirit the Holy Spirit is and always was. For the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God, His own life and breath, and our Lord Jesus is the Son of God, and Himself God from eternity. He came, the Holy One of God, to receive the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, who had no sin of which to repent or for which to receive remission, as He is Himself without any sin or shortcoming whatsoever. And this He did in order that He might be authorised to baptise sinners with the Holy Spirit, as John had said it that He would, that is: with the very life of God, that sinners, otherwise bound for eternal death and damnation, might instead share in the eternal life with God and live with Him for ever in the fullness of His goodness and His glory.

Having had Himself born into our kind, and having Himself baptised with sinners, the Son of God made Himself one with sinners, all in order that we might be made one with Him. For it was His will from eternity to share all things with us. He made us, to begin with, to be with Him, and to have all things good given to us out of His goodness. And although we are turned away from His love, as we all are, from the very first moment of our being, and this is why we constantly turn away from His love to seek our own instead, and the love of this world, His love for us never died; and therefore He Himself would die, for us, to restore us to His love, and to His life.

For this He came to us from His heavenly home in glory. For this He had Himself born into our kind to make Himself one with us in all that is ours. And for this He had Himself baptised with the baptism of sinners to make Himself one with us, even in our sin, He to whom sin is abominable, as is all evil. Such is the love of God; such is *His* love for us, who is Himself God from eternity.

Having Himself baptised with the Baptism of sinners, He had Himself baptised into the sin of sinners, to take our sin upon Himself, and more than that, to make Himself one with our sin, and make it His own. As He would later have His holy Apostle Paul write it of Him: *Him who knew of no sin God made to be sin for us, that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.* And having had Himself made to be sin for us, He would have Himself crucified, and cursed and condemned by the goodness of God, His holy hatred against sin and all other evil, the Holy One of God of whom the heavenly voice had declared it, as we heard it: *You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.* This He would suffer, for love of us, for love of you. So good is God.

He was baptised into death to earn the right to have sinners baptised into His own life, which is the life of God; to baptise sinners with the Holy Spirit, as it had been given to John to proclaim it in advance that He would, that is, again: with the very life of God. This is what was made manifest when immediately after having had Himself baptised into the sin of sinners, *He saw the heavens parting, as we hear it, and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove.*

The Spirit of God was always His own Spirit, since the Son of God is Himself God from eternity. But having taken upon Himself the sin that separate us sinners from the life of God, the Spirit is now His, also, to give to sinners, and for sinners to receive from Him, with the real remission of sin, and the eternal life of God, as He has sinners baptised into Himself and made one with Him in all that He is and all that is His. Having had Himself baptised with the Baptism of sinners, the Holy One of God has made the Baptism of sinners into a *life-giving water, rich in grace, as our Catechism says it, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit.*

As the heavenly voice declared it to our Lord Jesus at His Baptism, so the Word of God declares it to us, today and always, and to you, and to all who are baptised into Him and made one with Him: *You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.* Baptised into Him, Christian, you are righteous and right with God, born anew as His beloved child, as an heir to His heavenly life, His Kingdom, and His glory.

And so, as we celebrate the Baptism of our Lord Jesus, we celebrate, also, our own. And as we celebrate our Baptism, we celebrate our salvation; as we shall, for ever, along with Him.

Glory be to God on high, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men! Amen.