

SERMON – BAPTISM OF THE LORD 2026.

Well, it is only a few days since the epiphany, and two weeks since Xmas, when we remembered the events of our Lord's birth, and yet today we have moved forward 30 years in Our Lord's life and we celebrate his baptism as a man in the river Jordan as we have just heard by his cousin John the Baptist.

When I went on my pilgrimage to the Holy Land 3 years ago, I visited the supposed site of the baptism of Jesus by John, here are some photos. I was expecting the river Jordan to be a bit more impressive, not much more than a stream at this point, the other side of the river is the Kingdom of Jordan. I did wade in the water.

For most of those 30 years he lived an anonymous life, living in obscurity in Nazareth, but with the ministry of John, he goes to him for Baptism, the beginning of his public ministry and work. It is an important moment in Our Lord's life, a turning point, made clear with Our Lord being anointed by the Holy Spirit – as in the slide - in the form of a dove and then the Father's voice from heaven, acclaiming him, Jesus, to be his Son. By contrast we once again hear, as we did in Advent, that John, makes no claim to be the saviour or God's son, he tells the people clearly he is not the one who is to come, and with great humility that he is not even worthy to undo the sandals of the one who is to come. And so as Jesus begins to make himself known to the people, John disappears from the scene, eventually imprisoned and then martyred.

Our Lord's baptism by John begins a journey for Jesus which the Gospels hint lasts for 3 years, 3 years when he makes himself known to the people, of his preaching, teaching and healing, 3 years that will end in the cross, with his death on Calvary. We will follow that journey over the next 3 months as we journey towards the great feast of Easter, prepared for in the 40 days of Lent. Our Lord's baptism would begin that final public stage in Our Lord's life, when despite all the great things he will say and do, he will be rejected by the people and their leaders and be condemned as a criminal. But with his resurrection he will rise triumphantly from the dead, showing that the words of the Father in the Gospel today are true, that he is truly God's son.

So today when we remember the events of his baptism, the beginning of his public ministry it would seem appropriate to think about our own baptism, the beginning of our Christian lives. That was why at the beginning of mass, I performed the short ceremony of the blessing of holy water and then sprinkled all of you with it, a simple way of remembering our own baptism with holy water. But of course every time we come to Church we can do that, by blessing ourselves with holy water from the stoops at the back of church. By being baptised we have all become members of the Church, baptism is the rite of initiation, the enrolment ceremony and it gives us the great privilege of being able to call ourselves Christians – to be given the name of Christ himself. We call baptism a sacrament, one of the 7 sacraments, we cannot receive any of the others unless we have been baptised. In Baptism, Holy water is poured over the person's head 3 times, while invoking the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit – this carries the symbolism of washing, of the washing away of sin – which is what happens in baptism, our souls are cleansed of sin, including what we call original sin.

But there is also something else about baptism, the water is normally contained in a kind of bowl, we call it a font, that font as well as containing the holy water, the water that washes away sin, is also a symbol in one way for death, it represents the tomb – because of course water as well as giving life can also be dangerous, you can drown in water, it can kill you as well as give life.

So when someone is baptised, there is the symbolism and the reality of dying to sin, of dying to your old way of life, as you enter the water of the font, and then come out of the font to a new life, a life we pray free from sin and evil. So in Baptism we talk about sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ when we are baptised, in the water of the font, we die with him and then rise to new life with him. Of course we don't suffer as Christ did in his death, but we are born again, born to a new life, a life free from sin, a new life with God, in Jesus, through the Holy Spirit..

So baptism, and indeed all the sacraments are a way of sharing in the death and resurrection of Christ, of receiving the benefits, the grace that comes from our Lord's death and resurrection – and the greatest gifts are the forgiveness of sin and eternal life.

Finally whenever someone is baptised they have to take their baptismal promises, or at a Child's baptism, their parents and god-parents take these promises on their child's behalf. Every Easter we all renew these promises in each mass of Easter day, in these promises we are asked to reject the power of evil, to promise to turn away from sin and we also proclaim our faith in God, in God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Today, instead of saying the creed, let us renew these baptismal promises, as you came into Church most of you were given the text of these promises, please have a look at them now, prepare in a minute of silence to renew your dedication to God, and also to renew your rejection of sin and evil.