



JESUS IS BAPTISED: WHY?

(LUKE 3:15-16, 21-22)

Stained glass window in the Cathedral of Brussels, Belgium, depicting Jesus' baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist

We find mention of Jesus' being baptised at the beginning of all four Gospel versions. However, this presents a couple of problems, which Luke carefully avoids.

If John the Baptist baptises Jesus, does not this suggest that he is, somehow, greater than the one whom he baptises? Also, may this ritual not suggest that Jesus is a sinner in need of repentance? In the first part of our Gospel reading, John clearly declares himself to be the forerunner to the one more powerful. This person will bring a baptism, not of water, but of the Holy Spirit and of fire, the two elements which we find later in the Lukan writings at Pentecost, the last act of the Easter mystery.

Luke is also, like the other evangelists, beginning the story of Jesus' ministry. He wants our focus to be on the person and activity of Jesus, so he deftly removes John the Baptist from the narrative. There is room for only one major character on the stage at a time. The office of prophet passes from the Baptist to Jesus. This idea of the prophet will be a major theme in Luke's Gospel account.

The baptism of Jesus is another epiphany. Luke presents it as a personal, interior experience of Jesus, rather than one addressed to the wider group present. However, we are given a glimpse of this revelation by the author, that Jesus is God's "Son, the Beloved". The stage is now set for Jesus to embark on his ministry. ■

REFLECT

Why did Jesus present himself for baptism from John? Luke actually plays down John's role; he does not give any details about the ritual itself, or who carried it out. He avoids any suggestion that Jesus was guilty of sin which had to be forgiven. So what was the point?

Perhaps the solution to this conundrum might lie in the idea of solidarity. Jesus wished to show that he identified himself with all those people (including ourselves) who want to live a decent human life under the word of God. This means acknowledging shortcomings and intending to do better in future.

The idea of missing the mark, of falling short, is at the root of the most common New Testament word for sin. The notion that most Christian people are in open revolt against the will of God by greatly sinning is not implied in falling short. Perhaps by being baptised, Jesus is saying that he is on the side of all those who are doing their best, despite their weaknesses, and that it is this attempt to live up to the ideals of the Gospel that is more important. One feature of ideals is that they are usually (just?) out of reach, but it is the effort to live up to them that is most important. If we fail, it is not the end of the world: this seems to be what Jesus kept striving to tell people throughout his ministry. So let's keep trying! ■

LEARN

The baptism of Jesus is an *epiphany*: he is revealed as the Son of God.

The word *epiphany* means showing or revealing: the event tells us something about who Jesus really is.

The four Gospel narratives properly begin with the figure and ministry of John the Baptist.

DO

Put some water in a bowl: make the sign of the cross with it and renew your own baptismal commitment to God in Jesus.



SAY

The Lord will bless his people with peace.

(Psalm 28:11)

ENTRANCE ANTIPHON

After the Lord was baptised, the heavens were opened,
and the Spirit descended upon him like a dove,
and the voice of the Father thundered:
This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

GLORIA

Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to people of good will.

We praise you,
we bless you,
we adore you,
we glorify you,
we give you thanks for your great glory,
Lord God, heavenly King,
O God, almighty Father.

Lord Jesus Christ, Only Begotten Son,
Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father,
you take away the sins of the world,
have mercy on us;
you take away the sins of the world,
receive our prayer;
you are seated at the right hand of the Father,
have mercy on us.

For you alone are the Holy One,
you alone are the Lord,
you alone are the Most High, Jesus Christ,
with the Holy Spirit,
in the glory of God the Father.
Amen.

COLLECT

Almighty ever-living God,
who, when Christ had been baptised in the River Jordan
and as the Holy Spirit descended upon him,
solemnly declared him your beloved Son,
grant that your children by adoption,
reborn of water and the Holy Spirit,
may always be well pleasing to you.
Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God, for ever and ever.
Amen.

FIRST READING Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

A reading from the prophet Isaiah.

"Console my people, console them"
says your God.
"Speak to the heart of Jerusalem
and call to her
that her time of service is ended,
that her sin is atoned for,
that she has received from the hand of the Lord
double punishment for her crimes."

A voice cries, "Prepare in the wilderness
a way for the Lord.
Make a straight highway for our God
across the desert.
Let every valley be filled in,
every mountain and hill be laid low,
let every cliff become a plain,
and the ridges a valley;
then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed
and all mankind shall see it;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

Go up on a high mountain,
joyful messenger to Zion.
Shout with a loud voice,
joyful messenger to Jerusalem.
Shout without fear,
say to the towns of Judah,
"Here is your God."

Here is the Lord coming with power,
his arm subduing all things to him.
The prize of his victory is with him,
his trophies all go before him.
He is like a shepherd feeding his flock,
gathering lambs in his arms,
holding them against his breast
and leading to their rest the mother ewes.
The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

PSALM

Psalms 103

Response:

**Bless the Lord, my soul!
Lord God, how great you are.**

1. Lord God, how great you are,
clothed in majesty and glory,
wrapped in light as in a robe!
You stretch out the heavens like a tent. (R.)
2. Above the rains you build your dwelling.
You make the clouds your chariot,
you walk on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers
and flashing fire your servants. (R.)
3. How many are your works, O Lord!
In wisdom you have made them all.
The earth is full of your riches.
There is the sea, vast and wide,
with its moving swarms past counting,
living things great and small. (R.)
4. All of these look to you
to give them their food in due season.
You give it, they gather it up:
you open your hand, they have their fill. (R.)
5. You take back your spirit, they die,
returning to the dust from which they came.
You send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the earth. (R.)

SECOND READING Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

A reading from the letter of St Paul to Titus.

God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race and taught us that what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God, and all our worldly ambitions; we must be self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world, while we are waiting in hope for the blessing which will come with the Appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour Christ Jesus. He sacrificed himself for us in order to set us free from all wickedness and to purify a people so that it could be his very own and would have no ambition except to do good.

When the kindness and love of God our saviour for mankind were revealed, it was not because he was concerned with any righteous actions we might have done ourselves; it was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by renewing us with the Holy Spirit which he has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our saviour. He did this so that we should be justified by his grace, to become heirs looking forward to inheriting eternal life.

The word of the Lord.
Thanks be to God.

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Alleluia, alleluia!
Someone is coming, said John, someone greater than I.
He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.
Alleluia!

GOSPEL

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Luke.

A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, "I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire."

Now when all the people had been baptised and while Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape, like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you."

The Gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

PROFESSION OF FAITH

I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
(all bow during the next two lines)
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.
Amen.

PRAYER OVER THE OFFERINGS

Accept, O Lord, the offerings
we have brought to honour the revealing of your beloved Son,
so that the oblation of your faithful may be transformed into the sacrifice of him who willed in his compassion to wash away the sins of the world.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

COMMUNION ANTIPHON

Behold the One of whom John said:
I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.

PRAYER AFTER COMMUNION

Nourished with these sacred gifts,
We humbly entreat your mercy, O Lord,
that, faithfully listening to your Only Begotten Son,
we may be your children in name and in truth.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.