

HOM Baptism of the Lord 2018

John the Baptist almost certainly had no awareness of leaping for joy inside his mother when the Blessed Virgin Mary walked into their house carrying the pre-born Jesus in her womb. Today, pre-natal science would likely explain this as a pre-conscious reflexive response to Elizabeth's joyful welcome of Mary and her pre-born baby. However, the Scriptures suggest it may have been more than this.

In either case, as John grew up, even though Elizabeth probably talked about this experience with her son and explained what it meant, she was beyond child bearing age at the time of John's birth and may have died before he was old enough to understand the meaning of it.

His father, Zechariah, too, was up in age and although he surely would have told his son what he was given to know about him -- that he was to be a prophet who would prepare God's people to welcome the promised Messiah, namely his cousin Jesus, John may not have been old enough to grasp all this.

So, if both his parents had died by the time John reached the age of reason, he would have been left with only a vague and undeveloped recollection of what they had told him and of what he had experienced. After that, it would be up to the Holy Spirit to enlighten John about this and his mission, little by little, as he followed the Spirit's promptings, and received what he needed to know, and was able to piece it all together.

While John the Baptist was in the desert wilderness making ready to begin his public work of preparing the Jewish people to welcome the Promised Messiah -- or shortly after he had begun this work by calling the people to a symbolic baptism of repentance -- the Holy Spirit gave John a sign that would make clear to him the identity of the Messiah. In the Gospel according to John (John 1:33), after pointing Jesus out as the Lamb of God to some of his disciples, the Baptizer tells them that:

...I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'

Today's Gospel reading recounts the Baptism of Jesus at which John was given ***the sign he had been promised***. When the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended from Heaven and came upon Jesus, it was made clear to John that his cousin Jesus was the *Lamb of God*, and indeed, the *Anointed One*, the *Promised Messiah*, **the Christ**, about whom the Old Testament prophets had written.

The word "*Christ*" comes from *Christos*, a Greek word that means "the anointed one," or "the chosen one." The Hebrew word meaning the same thing is *Mashiach*, or as we know it—*Messiah*. So the word *Christ* is really more of a title than it is a name, although the Bible uses it

both ways. For example, the Bible often refers to Jesus by name as “Jesus Christ,” just as we do in modern usage, but it also speaks of Jesus as “the Christ,” meaning “the one anointed with the Holy Spirit,” the “Messiah”.

But there was more that John was given to know when he baptized Jesus. It was also made clear to him that Jesus is not only the Promised Anointed One, but is also God – the Son of God. A voice from Heaven was heard: “*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well-pleased.*” This voice was understood to be God’s voice – the voice of the Father. John’s mother Elizabeth had already exclaimed that Jesus was God when she said to Mary at the time of her visit: *Who am I that the mother of my Lord should come to me?*

And so, although the John was exposed to this as a pre-born baby, and it may have been told to him later by his mother, it was made unmistakably clear to him at Jesus’ Baptism which was an epiphany event, an event at which Jesus’ identity was made manifest...was made known.

Furthermore, the Baptism of Jesus was an epiphany event ***not only for John the Baptist***, but for all of us, and for the people of every generation. It was a kind of demonstration that just as God’s beloved Son – now in the Flesh as Son of Man – was anointed with the Holy Spirit, so every person anointed with the Holy Spirit at Baptism becomes a beloved son and daughter of God. By Baptism we are united to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit and become sharers in His divine nature – guaranteed!

What is not guaranteed, however, is 1) our keeping of this status into eternal life. A baptized person loses the anointing – the indwelling -- of the Holy Spirit called Sanctifying Grace with a single mortal sin. Repentance in the sacrament of Confession is the usual way to restore that grace. And while venial sins – no matter how numerous -- cannot take away the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, they can add up and make a mortal sin more likely.

The second non-guaranteed effect of Baptism is that it will make us pleasing to God like Jesus. Living in God’s grace after Baptism does indeed make us pleasing to God the Father, but it also leads us to become like Jesus in His service to His Father unto the Cross. In other words Baptism makes us children of God, united to Jesus, but it also leads us to grow to full stature in the likeness of Jesus. And if we are not willing to grow to full stature in Christ, we cannot please the Father as Jesus did. And to grow to full stature in Christ requires that we join in Jesus’ saving sacrifice of love so that all people – all the willing that is – attain a share in His divine glory.

We can see this as we look at the connection between our first reading and the Gospel. That first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah written some 600 years before Christ is an excerpt from the first of the four so-called Servant Songs found in Isaiah. These four Servant Songs describe a servant who is pleasing to God. Taken together they clearly describe Jesus in remarkable detail.

For example, we read today: *“Here is my servant whom I uphold”, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit.*” That’s what was made plain at Jesus’ Baptism by John in the Jordan, as recounted in today’s Gospel reading.

Speaking further for the Lord about this Servant with whom the Lord is pleased, we read that: *“He shall bring forth justice to the nations, not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. A bruised reed he shall not break, a smoldering wick he shall not quench...”* That is exactly how Jesus went about inviting people to into God’s Kingdom of justice and peace and love. He did not use force or compulsion or demagoguery, but only the power of truth and the grace of the Holy Spirit.

The fourth of the four Servant Songs describes the culmination of this Servant’s pleasing service. In it we read that:

There was in him no stately bearing to make us look at him nor appearance that would attract us to him....Yet it was our infirmities that he bore, our sufferings that he endured...he was pierced for our offenses, crushed for our sins...if he gives his life as an offering for sin, he shall see his descendants in a long life, and the will of the Lord shall be accomplished through him....through his suffering my servant shall justify many...because he surrendered himself to death...he shall take away their sins....Therefore I will give him his portion among the great. (Is. 53: 1-12)

In other words, this Servant, who is clearly Jesus, is well-pleasing to the Father because He offers Himself to the Father’s will for the salvation of all whom the Father loves, and lives this out unto the Cross and Resurrection.

If we who are baptized would like to become well-pleasing to the Father like Jesus, we must be willing to offer ourselves in Holy Communion to and with Jesus to the Father’s will for the salvation of all whom the Father loves, and live this out unto the Cross and Resurrection. Our Mother Mary did this and can help us do the same. I recommend the Eucharistic self-offering prayer found on the front of our bulletin that invokes her help. Just pray it silently and sincerely with every Holy Communion; I AM ALL YOURS O MOST LOVING JESUS THROUGH MARY YOUR MOTHER.