

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus. The baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of his public ministry. The Feast of the Baptism of Jesus marks the end of the liturgical season of Christmas.

For the ancient Israelites, the Exodus was the key event in their history. Prior history, beginning with creation, led up to the Exodus, and later history flowed from the Exodus. For Christians, Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is the center of our history. Today's reading from Isaiah prophesies the ministry of John the Baptist announcing the coming of the Messiah. We see the fulfillment of this Old Testament prophecy in the preaching of John and the baptism of Jesus. Today's reading from Paul's Letter to Titus is addressed to us as we live in the time between Jesus' historical coming and his final coming in glory.

Today's feast coupled with Jesus' Great Commission at the end of Matthew's Gospel suggests the importance and the meaning of baptism for Christians. During his public ministry, Jesus said, "*Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved...*" [Mk 16:16a]. His final commission to his disciples was to "*Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...*" [Mt.28:19].

In today's Gospel, John the Baptist contrasted his baptism with the baptism Jesus would bring: "*I am baptizing you with water... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" Still Jesus could not have chosen a more apt symbol for baptism than water. We use water for washing. We believe that baptism washes away original sin. Water is essential to life. Flowing water is life-giving. We believe that baptism gives us God's life and love as gift, the Holy Spirit.

After Jesus was baptized, heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove. A voice came from heaven, "*You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*" Although Jesus certainly already knew himself to be the Son of God, God the Father confirmed his identity, authenticating him and his ministry and mission. Jesus was the Son of God by nature. We believe that when we are baptized, we become sons and daughters of God by adoption. St. Irenaeus wrote, "The Son of God became what we are that he might make us what he is himself." In other words, the Son of God became human that he might make us sons and daughters of God.

My brothers and sisters, when Jesus chose water as the symbol for baptism, he was emphasizing that the waters of baptism are as important to eternal life as physical water is to physical life. Second, the primary gift of baptism is the gift of the Holy Spirit, i.e., the gift of God's life and love. Third, the gift of the Holy Spirit makes us God's sons and daughters and, therefore, brothers and sisters of one another. As God's sons and daughters and brothers and sisters of one another, as Paul wrote to Titus, we are "*to live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age...eager to do what is good.*"

"*To live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age...eager to do what is good*" addresses our relationship with God, others, and ourselves. To live devoutly is to cherish God and our relationship with God. To live justly is to live the Golden Rule in our relationships with others. To live temperately is to live a balanced life.