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Baptism - that of Jesus and our own

Welcome and Presentation

Prayer: God be in my head

1) Epiphany : The Holy Trinity revealed in the Baptism of Jesus Christ

Mt 3:13-17 + Mc 1:1-11 + Lc 3:21-22 + Jn 1:19-34

“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth...” (Gn 1:1) (The Father)

“In the beginning was the Word; the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came to be...” (Jn 1:1-2) (The Son)

“... God’s spirit hovered over the water” (Gn 1:2) (The Holy Spirit)

In the Old Testament the Trinity exists but does not appear as such.

With the baptism of Jesus the Trinity appears for the first time: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is why the Church celebrates Jesus’ baptism as the Epiphany. The word *Epiphany* comes from the Greek and means: to let appear, to show oneself on the surface, to appear.

The Epiphany makes the Trinity visible to us:

- The Father as the source of life,
- The Son as the incarnated Word who appears in the humility and the weakness of our own condition in order to show how he is near to us, how he lives in us and connects us to our Father,
- The Spirit as the energy of love which moves us, guides us and purifies us.

Because he is Christ, the incarnated Jesus was certainly conscious of his close link to the Creator, but, as a human being, the incarnated Jesus seems to experience for the first time through baptism his privileged relationship with God as his Father. He has a human way to discover this privileged relationship to our Father. The three persons of the Trinity are one, but they are nevertheless in relationship one with the other. They are one and share the same nature. They have one same will. 3 = 1. This is what the Epiphany makes us conscious of. The Epiphany of the baptism is also deeply linked with the revelation of the Transfiguration. They are both expressions of the Trinity which makes itself visible to us or to the disciples. In this way both have to do with enlightenment.

What is the meaning of the baptism of Jesus? We can say that his baptism is before all the sign of our salvation, it is the manifestation of the grace which washes us from our sins, makes us free and gives us access to salvation, and to life. It is also a form of death which announces Jesus' death as a passage to liberation. It also announces the judgement to come. In fact the Epiphany through the baptism of Jesus reveals to us the true nature of God as Trinity, who is love and who lives among us; this new knowledge opens to us the path of liberation.

Text relating to the Icon of Jesus' Baptism

Prayer: 10 min. in silent contemplation in front of the icon: Jesus' baptism. How does it talk to you? Feel free to use pen and paper to note anything down. When the bell rings, you have another 10 min. to go for a walk outside to deepen your reflections. Try to identify the "epiphanies", that is, moments of deep truth in your life which changed you in some way.

Sharing Please treat everything that is shared here as confidential to this group and this time.

2) Baptism

The word *baptism* means to be plunged or immersed. As you plunge your bread into the sauce.

There is a first big difference between the rite of baptism as the Jews used to practise it and the baptism with water by John the Baptist. The first one was a rite of purification which had to be repeated. By contrast, the baptism of John is unique, as it happens now only once in our life. We will try later to better understand why it is unique in our life and not something to be repeated.

This kind of unique purification is linked with water or with blood as a sacrifice. Purification makes us take part in the death of Jesus. First, in baptism, there is a loss: we lose our old skin, and we have to die to ourselves. In order to rise we have first to die, to lose our old being which is made out of our ambitions and our false representations about life, where we feel we have to accumulate what we can get and to achieve something which will procure us more satisfaction, status etc. When we get free of these patterns, we can surrender to God and find in him our salvation and our source of life.

We can describe five steps in baptism:

- 1) **First step - God's love and salvation.** God offers us his love. He offers us salvation because his love is stronger than our sins. He loves us beyond our sins. Salvation is given. It is a fact once for ever.
- 2) **Second step - renunciation.** If we want to answer this precious offer, we have to renounce the world. Material and sensual pleasures are only illusions when they are enjoyed for themselves out of context of what they are: gifts from the Creator which we must not strive to possess and cling to; they do not last and once we crave them, we always crave more. They are not an obstacle as such to our spiritual life, but they distract us from the path especially because we are addicted to them. We must therefore become free of this slavery.
- 3) **Third step - repentance.** We must repent. We have already described many times what repentance is, what *metanoia* is; it is a complete change of mind and a deep revolution in the orientation of our life. It is the understanding that true life is in God and in our relationship with him. We know that we are nothing without him because he is the source of our life and being. Every time we say "I", we chase him out of our life, because we should say "we" or even "He in

me”. He does not impose his presence, because real love is not heavy; it remains discrete, tender and even hidden. This way of repenting in the depths of ourselves is a constant exodus out of ourselves because we know how incomplete we are: then truth is leading our lives, and not our desires unless it is the desire to be united with God.

- 4) **Fourth step - purification.** The act of baptism is before all the sign of a purification which is an act of God, through pure grace. We receive it as a gift of life. If we accept to renounce our self-driven life and if we see that God is the only real source of true life, then God gives us this precious gift of purification. Purification reveals us that salvation occurred once for ever and that we are free.
- 5) **Fifth step - perfection.** Perfection occurs as a consequence of our repentance and God’s grace. It is not a fruit of ours; it is a pure gift of God. Of course we never reach perfection but we have a glimpse of what it means to become sons and daughters of God. As a father of the Church says: The more one is united to God, the more one knows that God cannot be known. The more one becomes perfect, the more one knows one’s own imperfection.

Through this process of purification, while we die with Jesus, we lose our old identity and a new identity gets born in God’s love. This experience of a true love changes our nature.

Time of personal recollection:

It is said that we have to die to ourselves. We have to lose our life in order to gain true life and love. Try to remember the events where you have experienced a similar death, which has had a freeing impact on you in the end, though it seemed only awful at the time. You can take some paper and a pen if it can help you.

We remain in silence here or in the other room. We meet again here in 10 min. for prayer and sharing.

Prayer: We are the mediocre...

Sharing

TEA

3) Covenant and grace

As we have said before, baptism occurs once for ever. It cannot be repeated. Yet we continue to fall, we have to restart again and again. Certainly we learn and improve our behaviour but nevertheless nothing can be considered as acquired. This is an apparent contradiction in baptism which is difficult to understand. Why does it happen once for ever while we have to purify ourselves again and again. Is the Jewish rite not more adequate, because of its repetition?

In fact baptism is the visible sign of grace and of our purification. It comes to us as the gift of salvation. God gives us salvation once for ever. We are saved; it is fact which has not to be repeated. The repetition is not in the fact of salvation but in our effort to understand this fact. We forget, we get distracted, but salvation remains. Through baptism we try to engrave on our skin the knowledge of this reality.

I have always been puzzled by a double question: does Jesus' death on the cross change our reality or does it change our understanding? I have come to the personal view that it is probably the same, as our understanding of the truth of salvation changes deeply our life by giving a meaning to it which it could not have without God's pure love. Our understanding is the powerful event which changes ourselves, and for this understanding Jesus' death was necessary. The same question can be asked about our baptism; does it change our life as an act of transformation or does this transformation become effective through our consciousness which changes our life? God has been the same since the beginning and his love has always been active, for Abraham, for Jeremiah, as well as for us. God's reality does not change but we are changing under God's teaching and grace. That is the result of the Epiphany.

Our baptism is an act of God through grace and purification, but it is also a covenant. We commit ourselves to follow him. God has made himself man in order for man to take part in his divinity. God's offer calls for an answer on our part. We have to water the seeds God has put into us!

Time of personal recollection:

Let us reflect on our own baptism: how far is my own baptism a grace *I receive* and how much is it a covenant *to which I commit myself*? Prepare yourselves in silence for 5 min. I'll ring the bell. Then we will form small groups of 3 people and share what you want for 20 min.

Sharing in small groups of 3 people

Let me remind you again that everything that is shared here is confidential to our group.

4) Water and fire

In our baptism, different dimensions of our life can meet:

- grace given by God and commitment of ours to follow him,
- water as purification of our old skin and fire as a purification of our inner being.

We can describe baptism according to two movements:

- 1) one downwards of the gifts of God he pours out onto us: salvation, purification, detachment, renunciation, commitment, which can all be symbolised by water.
- 2) one upwards by which God draws us closer to himself: through His grace, to share in his divinity, our true nature, through the Holy Spirit, which can all be symbolised by fire.

Baptism is "out of"/through water and "out of"/through fire, as John explains it. Water has more to do with our cleansing from the outer world while fire has more to do with the purification of our inner life. Water washes us from illusions and false beliefs. Fire is at the same time energy which stimulates us, and destruction which helps us to get rid of anything that is a hindrance on our way to God. Fire burns us; it is not always nice and easy but it is destroying in us these aspects of ourselves which remain in the way to God. Burning is purification. The Holy Spirit, who is shown as a flame, is this acting force in us which carries us on our way to God and which allows us to make choices.

The last judgement is shown as a big fire which will purify us. The word *justice*, in Hebrew and in Greek, has many meanings; it is in fact a chain of meanings which goes from the capacity to notice a difference and from the concept of discernment to the concept of judgement and of punishment; the verb based on this root means: to discern, perceive, distinguish, appreciate, discuss, examine,

decide, estimate as right and just, redress a wrong, exercise justice, take a judicial decision, condemn. In this sense, the last judgement seems more to be an opportunity of seeing clearly where the truth is, than a torture for those who could not identify the truthful path. Justice in this sense can be thought of more as a clear way of seeing, as a clear-sightedness rather than a “revenge”. And fire is the means of this purifying power which brings this clear-sightedness. May be that is why the Holy Spirit is often represented as a flame.

Fire comes to burn the dross of our soul. We have to lose our life and our social identity in order to find our true nature which is in God. We have to lose ourselves in order to find our roots. We have to burn our identity in order to purify this identity from all the layers of protection we have covered it with, because we are afraid of remaining naked in the sight of God.

In Lk 12:49-53, Jesus says: “I have come to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were blazing already! There is a baptism I must receive, and how great is my distress till it is over! Do you suppose that I am here to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on a household of five will be divided: three against two and two against three; the father divided against the son, son against father, mother against daughter, daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.”

What is the nature of this fire Jesus talks about?

Time of personal recollection:

Reflect on your identity: you are not simply your body, nor your mind, nor your memory, nor any of these partial and visible aspects of your person; you are all of that but you are still much more. How can you invite and allow more and more God’s Holy Spirit to burn the little, narrow self so that the true and real self can be formed and be revealed?

Prayer: We sit together in silent prayer, allowing the Holy Spirit to move us in our depths. If you feel drawn to expressing and sharing something in a few sentences, please feel free. Or you may just want to speak to God. We do not discuss what each of us says, we just receive it in gratitude.. It is a time of prayer where we welcome what is, now. Leave some silent time between each person’s sharing, so that we can integrate what has been said. I’ll ring the bell at the end (in 15 min.).

Prayer: Come Holy Spirit

Blessing: p71