

Kingdom Obedience

First weekend of Lent, year B

Gen 9:8-17; Psalm 25; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

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Introduction

Today is the first weekend of Lent. Those are the weeks leading up to Easter. This whole period we'll focus on the obedience and the suffering of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Gospel reading of today has that very focus.

Baptism of Jesus

Why was Jesus baptized as the beginning of his public ministry? Baptism is for the forgiveness of sins, and that was certainly not what Jesus needed. Throughout the centuries theologians have come up with many answers to this question. To me, two answers seem in order: He was baptized for 'human identification;' and for 'heavenly consecration'.

Human identification: By being baptized, Jesus purposely identified with humankind in its need for repentance and baptism. Isaiah 53:12 describes the expected Savior of Israel:

He poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.

So, we have to see the baptism of Jesus in the light of his identification with mankind, as he vicariously embraced us all in order to fulfill God's purposes.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his book *Jesus of Nazareth – part I* (New York, 2007), pp. 16-17, says about this:

The real novelty is the fact that he – Jesus – wants to be baptized, that he blends into the grey mass of sinners waiting on the banks of the Jordan. [...] This yes to the entire will of God also expresses solidarity with men, who have uncured guilt but yearn for righteousness. The significance of this event could not fully emerge until it was seen in light of the Cross and Resurrection.

He bore the sins of many: By being baptized, Jesus got beneath the burden of human sin and bore it all the way to Calvary. So, his baptism was the formal moment when He accepted his Father's task on earth; now there was no way back.

Jesus now numbered himself with the transgressors, in line with what I read from Isaiah 53. The road would lead straight to the Cross. And is baptism itself not also a symbol of dying? Many icons of John the Baptist baptizing our

Lord, show the water in which Jesus was baptized in the form of a coffin.

His baptism was also *Heavenly consecration:* When Jesus began to sacrifice his life for humankind as the obedient servant of his Father, God from heaven spoke loud and clear, indicating his pleasure in this Son and in the sacrifice he was to bring. 'You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased.'

William Hendriksen, in his commentary *Mark* (NTC) (1983), pp. 42-43, says:

The demand of Jesus to be baptized by John signified his solemn resolution to take upon himself the guilt of those for whom he was going to die. [...] And the Father, as it were deeply impressed with the willingness of his Son to shoulder so heavy a burden [...] proclaims, 'Thou art my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased', to put his stamp of approval upon Jesus and the work he is to do.

God put the stamp of approval on who Jesus was and on what he did. The action of obedience and sacrifice of Jesus opened the heavens because finally there was someone who pleased God fully. From then on the whole world could know: the highway between heaven and earth is open – no more roadblocks of our sins – thanks to Jesus Christ

And with this scene of God's affirmation of the person and the service of Jesus, Mark brings us straight to the heart of the matter. We get an image of intimacy. This is not a boss petting his laborer on the shoulder and giving him a bonus, saying 'Well done'. It is God as Father who speaks to his Beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove shares in this moment of intimacy. This is not just a good servant; here we witness something of the Trinity. God the Father meeting with the Son and the Spirit.

This voice from heaven did not say: 'Now you are my Son', as if that *begun* at his baptism. The voice simply recognized that the one baptized is the eternal Son of God. In the quiet recess of eternity the Son has always been the object of the Father's inexhaustible delight.

Jesus is the incarnation of the eternal Son – who is wholly other than we are – he is eternal. But because of his incarnation and identification with humankind, He is also able to be the eternally *present* one, even in our lives. He is our creator and redeemer – intimately close to us.

St Augustine, in his *Confessions*, III.6.11, wrote

He is more interior to each one of us than we are to ourselves.

Obedience of Jesus

The value of the life and death of Jesus for our salvation is located in the quality of the sacrifice. It was no mere human being, but God himself who suffered. And it lay in the obedience of the Son of God. It was, in short, a perfect sacrifice that began with baptism.

And as if the proud Father in heaven wanted to show to the whole world that his Son is indeed the perfectly obedient one that He had never found on earth, the Spirit of God himself brought Jesus into a situation where he was then tempted. There was no interval between the glory of Christ's baptism and the hardship of temptation. The suffering servant proceeded from daylight of God's affirmation, to the darkness of Satan's temptation.

The temptation of Jesus reminds us of the temptation of Adam. Whereas Adam, by being tempted in the most exquisite garden of Eden, brought sin and misery into our world, Jesus brought salvation by not falling for the temptations – even though he was in the desert, in the most miserable environment thinkable.

Jesus was among wild beasts; the Jordan Valley and the adjacent desert have been known as the haunt of hyenas, jackals, and panthers, even lions. Jesus was with these wild animals and they did not hurt him; was this not a sign that the Messianic Kingdom had come?

It was the scene of abandonment, the very opposite of paradise where the first Adam did not stand the temptation. Adam failed, but Jesus was victorious. He not only did the perfect will of His Father for our salvation, but he also gives us an example.

We are also often tested when we are alone. In his commentary on the *Gospel of St Mathew* 13.1, church father Chrysostom writes: 'The devil assails us when he sees us left alone and by ourselves.' Good company helps us to avoid many things that could otherwise tempt us.

The temptations we face are many and they are serious. Anything that distracts us from doing the will of God is a temptation. And each time we do not perfectly love our Lord God and our neighbors, we lose and temptation has won. Temptations should drive us back to God and his grace, because without His gracious and helpful presence, we are lost.

In the *Navarre Bible* on St Mark, p. 54, I read:

The Lord sometimes permits that souls which are dear to him, should be tempted with some violence, in order that they may better understand their

own weakness and the necessity of grace to prevent them from falling.

Our Lord Jesus understands our temptations and He helps us to hold on. Just as His Father sent his angels to serve him, He will send his angels to help us – if we do our utmost to follow Him each day.

Jesus was 40 days in the desert; this reminds us of the journey of Israel through the desert. Israel failed badly in obeying God – but Jesus did not. He is often portrayed in the Gospel as the servant of God that Israel should have been. How sad that for finding such an obedient servant, God could not find any person. He had to send his own Son to be obedient in the place of place of Israel, in our place, in order to finally please God.

Jesus triumphed over the enemy and could therefore bring his people into the Promised Land. And after his baptism – as Israel left Egypt through the red sea, and after his 40 days in the desert – as Israel was 40 years in the desert – he now brings us into the Promised Land. How does Jesus bring us into the Promised Land?

Kingdom of God

Jesus proclaims that the Kingdom of God is near – the Promised Land. There is no doubt that in his days, many Jews who heard Jesus preach about the Kingdom, confused this with their political views of a restored land of Israel. Had God not promised this so often in the Old Testament?

But if people took time to listen well to Jesus, they found out that he spoke of something wider, and deeper. It is a spiritual realm, not a political organization. The Kingdom He spoke about, had to do with the reign of God in the lives of people, yes, eventually culminating in the reign of God over the universe.

The Kingdom He wants to lead us into has five important aspects. It has to do with the

- Kingship of God, his rule in our lives today
- It is complete salvation, nothing in life is excluded;
- The church is central in it, as the community of people where God is obeyed;
- Eventually, it is about the redemption of the whole universe.
- Jesus Christ is central in all this.

Jesus has come to lead us into this Kingdom of God. The door is open; heaven is open. His voice, even today, sounds loud and clear: repent, believe, and be baptized. In order to enter into his royal realm, we need a massive change of mind and lifestyle.

This change of mind has a negative aspect – it means turning away from sin. If we only do this,

without faith in the saving Christ, this conversion can lead to mere remorse. That can be destructive, as remorse offers no hope. We also need faith in the salvation of Jesus Christ – to enter into His Kingdom.

We enter into his Kingdom if we confess with our mouth and believe with our heart that Jesus Christ is Lord. (Rom 10:9). And, obviously, this entails obedience. Just as Jesus was obedient.

Repentance is not a one-off thing and it is not only the beginning of Christian life. A Christian continually experiences the dialectic of knowing God, repenting, knowing him better, repenting, etc. Pope John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, p. 13, says about this:

Authentic knowledge of the God of mercy, the God of tender love, is a constant and inexhaustible source of conversion, not only as a momentary interior act but also as a permanent attitude, as a state of mind.

God's Kingdom has come - as Jesus has inaugurated his rule over us. And Gods Kingdom will come – as He will make all things new. Our

proper response is to live a life of continual repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

God asks us to follow Jesus Christ. His ministry began with baptism and led to him sacrificing his life. Our Christian life began with our baptism, and God asks of us a sacrifice as well: The sacrifice of all of our life to Him. Let us use this period of lent to consider this personally.

God the Father calls us through his Son, to do exactly what Jesus did: to honor him in word and deed. And to stand against temptation. For the sake of participating in his Kingdom, He wants us to continually turn away from sin to serving God, and to believe in Jesus Christ.

Let us be committed to following him, just as Jesus obeyed God his Father. And if we do so, we can be assured that in our wilderness experiences, his angels will serve us too, yes his Holy Spirit will help us to obey Him.

++ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit *Amen*