

'Baptism of Jesus, for us'

Is 42: Here is my servant whom I uphold Ps 28: The Lord's voice resounding o
the waters Acts 10: *God anointed Him with the Holy Spirit and with power*
Mt 3: 13–17: *Jesus was baptized and came up from the water ...*

Do you know when & where you baptized? What was the date? What was the church? Maybe you were baptized in *hospital* if you were premature or at some risk when you were born. Perhaps you know full well these pieces of information, or perhaps you don't. I think that they're quite important. I was baptized at 18 days in St Mary's Clapham, 60 years ago in March, and have long wanted to re-visit it as an adult, but the two times I've tried, the church was, sadly, locked. I'll keep trying!

My mother, for whom I offered a 4th-anniversary Mass last night in the church that was her spiritual home for most of her 89yrs of life, was baptized there in that church on 23rd October 1932 ... It was fitting, and *homely* in a prayerful sense, to be able in February 2022 to celebrate her Requiem Mass in the same church in which she was baptized all those years before. Please God, we, too, shall be clothed in Christ from Baptism day to Funeral

day, and still be found in the house of God at the last — and the *Baptismal garment* shall clothe our coffin in death, and the *Paschal Candle* burn alongside us once again as it did at our Baptism, to light our way through death to life.

Many of us, I imagine, have very little mental picture of our own Baptism, for the likelihood is that we were baptized young — just weeks or months old — and it's right that we were. It's ideal, it's what the Church envisages for those born into believing families, that we are baptized at the earliest opportunity, to enter into life in Christ and have the grace of Jesus inhabiting our souls from the youngest age. But it also does mean that we have little memory of it — other than just some photos — and despite its being the most significant day of our life after the day we were *conceived*, it's probably a day we give little thought to ... For many, it'll be when we are then Confirmed — or more likely when we are asked to be godparents, or when we have children of our own — that we start to think again about Baptism in a systematic and serious way. And yet, Baptism is the *key* sacrament, the

entry into the Christian life, and the gateway to the other sacraments. Our Baptism should be recalled as a moment of immense joy, and we should be deeply thankful that those who led us to Baptism — whether our parents, grandparents, or friends — had the faith to do so. Take some time, later, to *look up* — or ask someone — your place and date of Baptism, and give God thanks for that sacred day. Try to keep each year in a special way, your baptism anniversary, even if it's just a secret celebration between you and God — it's the blessed *anniversary of your new relationship* with Him! Today's feast of the Baptism of Jesus, concluding the Christmas season, gives us each an opportunity to reflect on our Baptism, and on those whose faith led us to this saving Sacrament.

For Jesus, Baptism meant the end of his 30 quiet years of hidden family life, and the start of his 3 tiring years of preaching, travelling and ministering to the people. In the past week we've celebrated the Epiphany, when He was first made known to the world in the persons of the Magi — today we pick up that same theme of

'epiphany' (His *being 'manifested,'* made known), some 30 years later: His Baptism begins to open up an understanding of who He is to those around Him. As Jesus rises up out of the Jordan river, He is announced to be God the Son, with whom God the Father is pleased, and on whom God the Holy Spirit rests. This is not just another person coming for repentance, but God Himself coming to grace the waters of Baptism. And John the Baptist senses this: *You come to me for Baptism?* John's baptism was a sign of repentance, an act of sorrow for sins, and yet Jesus, completely without sins, comes forward too. John Himself is baffled and resists Jesus's approach, but Jesus insists — He uses John's ministry of baptism to associate Himself with sinners; to immerse His divine self in the sinfulness of the world; and to make holy the waters of Baptism. No longer was baptism to be just the outward sign of repentance which John intended, but it was to be the sacrament which Jesus intended, actually giving forgiveness and new life in Jesus. So, Jesus was baptized not to *be* sanctified, but to sanctify Baptism itself, making

it something Christian and for ever, not just some Jewish purification rite to be left behind.

Jesus's Baptism is not, in other words, for *Himself*: He is in no need of it, spiritually, for He is the Son of God, although in His humanity it is markedly a great new start, the beginning of His public ministry. But His Baptism is in fact for *us*! When the Holy Spirit descends on Him, dramatically, as a sign from the heavenly Father that He is truly God the Son, then it is in fact the waters of Baptism that receive the sanctification. Baptism is then no longer the simple ritual of penance that John had administered (a 'baptism of water'). Now, it involves the coming of the Holy Spirit, given by the Father to humanity because of the Son's union with the human race: it is now the 'baptism of Spirit and fire,' the *Sacrament* itself! This is the point of Jesus's Baptism — this is why He insisted on receiving the pouring of water from John, so that in Himself He could transform it into something newer and greater for His people, a real outpouring of the Spirit!

So: once we are baptized, we have a mission. Just as

Christ, after His Baptism went out in public to take God's message of love actively to the people, so we cannot ignore what our Baptism means, whether or not we remember the actual event. We are changed, or should be: to live out our Baptism means to be co-operating in the work of Jesus. And just as Jesus insists that John baptize Him, so He insists on using each one of us through our Baptism to make holy our little bit of the world. The people we know, and the places we find ourselves, only we can bring Christ to; no-one else, only you — and *that is your mission*. It may require some great spiritual effort, and some deep breaths of the Holy Spirit, some decisive will-power to be faithful to the Christian calling; but Christ gives us all that in the Church which is where His Spirit dwells.

As we mark on this feast of the Lord's Baptism a momentous occasion in Jesus's life, but done *for us*, let's all be reminded of the importance of our Catholic sacramental life, and hold dear to our hearts the fact that we have had the right people around us who have given us the example and prompting to know and love the Lord

Jesus, and come to life in Him. My family, for instance, will be eternally grateful for the example that Mum set us in this. We thank God for His holy influence exercised over us, through her.

Our love for the Lord is expressed in a huge variety of ways, but accepting His great gifts — His Spirit in Baptism; His Body & Blood in the Eucharist; His forgiveness in Confession — is in large part how we unite ourselves with the loving Lord. Let's not under-estimate this, nor choose to forget or ignore it. *The Sacraments flow with abundant grace from the sacred heart of Jesus ...* so let's really *bathe in* this grace, and come to be refreshed, being made more-peaceful and more-perfect human beings, more loving people simply because of Him. Let's honour this feast of our dear Lord's Baptism with a re-commitment for 2026 to living the Sacraments well, in other words, as *utterly immersed in Jesus* as He chose to immerse Himself in us at the waters of the Jordan River.