

THE EMMAUS SERIES

The Baptism of the Lord Year B

Isaiah 55:1-11

1 John 5:1-9

Mark 1:7-11

You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you

The baptism by John in the river Jordan would not have been easy for the first Christians to understand. On the face of it, this undergoing of a ritual of repentance did not seem to make sense. It can only have been included in the gospel tradition because it really happened. However, the account we have in Mark's gospel shows us that reflection upon this event led to an understanding of its great significance - as the defining inauguration of the mission of Jesus. It was the Father's authorization of the public role he was about to assume, and a prefiguring of the climax to which his career would lead - the Paschal Mystery - which he was later to look forward to as 'a baptism' (Lk 12:50).

The destiny of each of us has its origin in the Father's decision, before time began, to create us and to call us to a unique place in the divine plan of creation. Our response to God's call is made as we take up the issues of our lives. Because he 'has been put to the test in exactly the same way as we ourselves are, apart from sin' (Heb 4:15), the Eternal Son's life among us followed the same pattern as ours. His baptism by John was a decisive moment in his human life. Come to carry forward the designs of God among the chosen people, Jesus came and mingled with the enthusiastic crowd listening to John's preaching. Submitting to John's baptism was a moment of compassionate solidarity that he would have prayerfully shared with the Father. Suddenly, Mark's account takes an unexpected turn - 'the heavens are torn open' and a Trinitarian drama unfolds as the presence of God's Spirit is made manifest, and the incarnate Son receives a commission from the Eternal Father, indicating what is in store for him in the public mission he will undertake: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.'

This commission echoes two Old Testament traditions. 'You are my Son' - the gospels make it clear that Jesus was sustained throughout his public life by his relationship with his Father. Though the phrase 'son of God' meant originally no more than an adoptive sonship (as, for example, in honour of Israel's kings (e.g. Ps 2:7), when Mark's gospel was written, applied to Jesus these words referred to the unique, strictly divine sonship that was one of the basic themes of the New Testament. 'You are the Beloved; my favour rests on you', echoes God's words to the 'Suffering Servant' in Isaiah: 'here is my servant; the chosen one in whom my soul delights' (Is 42:1). This remarkable 'Servant' tradition takes us to the very threshold of the Christian Gospel. It foretells - in the time of the nation's exile humiliation - a future triumph of God, through one will 'astonish the nations' as he embodies the nation's true destiny, 'a man of sorrows', 'led like a lamb to the slaughter house', bringing 'healing' to the people as he 'bears the sorrows' of all (cf. Is 52-53). The commission of the Father indicated, therefore, that the compassionate solidarity that led Jesus to undergo John's baptism would be the pattern of the mission he was about to undertake. Today's first reading from Isaiah (closely associated with the 'Servant' prophecies) celebrates the glorious future the Saviour will inaugurate: God's banquet, a new exodus, an everlasting covenant, the triumph of God's Word.

John Thornhill sm