

BAPTISM OF THE LORD – YEAR A

(Isaiah 42, 1...7; Acts 10, 34-38; Matthew 3, 13-17)

(Excerpts from Pope Francis - *Angelus* - 2023)

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Brothers and sisters, the Gospel presents us with an astonishing scene. It is the first time that Jesus appears in public after his hidden life in Nazareth. He arrives on the bank of the River Jordan to be baptized by John (cf. Mt 3:13-17). It is a rite by which the people repented and committed to converting. A liturgical hymn says that the people went to be baptized “with a bare soul and bare feet” — that is, with humility and with a transparent heart.

But, seeing Jesus mingling with the sinners, we are surprised and we wonder: why did Jesus make that choice? He, the Saint of God, the Son of God without sin, why did he make that choice? We find the answer in Jesus’ words to John: “Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness” (v. 15). Fulfill all righteousness: what does it mean? By having himself baptized, Jesus reveals God’s justice, that justice he came to bring into the world.

Very often we have a limited idea of justice, and think that it means: those who do wrong pay, and in this way compensate for the wrong they have done. But God’s justice, as the Scripture teaches, is much greater. It does not have the condemnation of the guilty as its end, but their salvation, rebirth and their being made righteous: from unjust to just. It is a justice that comes from love, from the depths of compassion and mercy that are the very heart of God, the Father who is moved when we are oppressed by evil and fall under the weight of sins and fragility.

God’s justice, then, is not intended to distribute penalties and punishments but rather, as the Apostle Paul affirms, it consists of making us, his children, righteous (cf. Rm 3:22-31), freeing us from the snares of evil, healing us, raising us up again. The Lord is never ready to punish us. His hand is outstretched to help us rise up. And so, we understand that, on the banks of the Jordan, Jesus reveals to us the meaning of his mission: He came to fulfil divine justice, which is that of saving sinners; he came to take on his own shoulders the sin of the world and to descend into the waters of death, so as to rescue us and prevent us from drowning.

He shows us today that God’s true justice is the mercy that saves. God is mercy because his justice is indeed the mercy that saves. It is the love that shares our human condition, that makes itself close, in solidarity with our suffering, entering into our darkness to restore light.

Brothers and sisters, we might be afraid to think of such a merciful justice. Let us move forward: God is mercy. His justice is merciful. Let us allow him to take us by the hand.

We too, disciples of Jesus, are required to exercise justice in this way, in relationships with others, in the Church, in society: not with the harshness of those who judge and condemn, dividing people into good and bad, but with the mercy of those who welcome by sharing the wounds and frailties of their sisters and brothers, so as to lift them up again. Not dividing, but sharing. Let us do as Jesus did: let us share, let us carry each other's burdens instead of gossiping and destroying, let us look at each other with compassion, let us help each other. Let us ask ourselves: am I a person who divides or shares? Am I a disciple of Jesus' love or a disciple of gossip that divides. Gossip is a lethal weapon: it kills, it kills love, it kills society, it kills fraternity.

Let us pray to Mary Our Lady, who gave life to Jesus, immersing him in our frailty so that we might receive life again. May this Eucharist help us *become a living force for all people, lights shining in the world. Be radiant lights as you stand beside Christ, the great light, bathed in the glory of him who is the light of heaven. Be more and more the pure and dazzling light of the Trinity, you have received through your baptism —though not in its fullness—a ray of its splendor, proceeding from the one God, in Christ Jesus our Lord, to whom be glory and power for ever and ever. Amen. (Saint Gregory of Nazianzus - Breviary)*