

July 25, 2010

Olympia, Deaconess of Constantinople

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

From early in their history, Christians have annually set aside a special day---traditionally January 6---to commemorate Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. The hymnography composed for that day emphasizes that the Lord's baptism was the occasion on which "the worship of the Trinity was made manifest"; God was explicitly revealed to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For that reason, Christians in the East named that feast "Theophany," meaning "the appearance of God."

Any of the biblical accounts of that event---Matthew, Mark, or Luke---could have been chosen as the major Gospel reading for Theophany, inasmuch those three sources---considered as *narratives*---serve a theophanic purpose; each version of the story reveals the mystery of the Holy Trinity to its readers.

Although Christians read all three stories of the Lord's baptism at some service or other in the course of the feast, Matthew's account is the one traditionally selected for reading at the day's principal service, the Holy Eucharist. There is a special reason for this primacy of place, I believe:

Although each version of the story is theophanic *as a narrative*---as a message for its readers---only Matthew's account describes *the event itself* as theophanic. Matthew alone suggests that the original witnesses of Jesus' baptism were the intended audience of the voice of the Father declaring, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (3:17). Matthew's use of the third person---"This is"---indicates that the identity of Jesus was revealed to the bystanders *within the story*.

We may contrast Matthew's perspective on this point with that of Mark, who describes the event very differently: "And immediately, coming up from the water, He saw the heavens parting and the Spirit descending upon Him like a dove. And there was a voice came from heaven, 'You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (1:10-11).

Here the Father addresses Jesus alone---"You are"---and only Jesus is said to see the Spirit descending like a dove. Although Mark's version is theophanic as a narrative proclaimed to the Church---the readers hear the voice and see the dove---it does not portray the event itself as theophanic; nothing is said about a revelation to the bystanders.

In Luke's account of the Lord's baptism, we find yet another and more complex perspective. Here the attention is clearly fixed on the Father's voice speaking to the Son: "*You* are My beloved Son; in *You* I am well pleased" (3:22, emphasis

added). Not only, as in Mark, does Luke employ the grammatical second person---"You"---he actually uses the word twice. He provides a double emphasis on the I-Thou structure of the revelation.

To be interpreted correctly, Luke's version of the story should be understood within the general context of his Gospel. This evangelist had already laid down, pretty early, the principle that would guide his account of Jesus: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature" (2:52). Luke intended his account of the Lord's baptism as an illustration of that "increase" in wisdom.

One should not imagine, of course, that Jesus, prior to His baptism, was unaware of His identity as God's Son. According to Luke, on the contrary, Jesus spoke of that identity eighteen years earlier, when He inquired, "Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" (1:49) There is nothing in Luke---nor in the other evangelists---even faintly to suggest that the baptism was the occasion of a "subjective adoption," as though Jesus, whom God called "My Son," suddenly became aware of His true identity: "Aha, so *that's* who I am!"

Nonetheless, Luke does describe the Lord's baptism as a decisive revelatory event in Jesus' life---not in the material and objective sense that some "new content" was revealed to Him, but in the formal and subjective sense that His consciousness of the Father's presence (and love!) was dramatically enhanced through the experience of being baptized.

Indeed, Luke indicates that the atmospheric context of this experience was Jesus' prayer: "Jesus also was baptized; and while *He prayed*, heaven was opened" (3:21, emphasis added). (Luke alone mentions Jesus' prayer at this time.) Jesus emerges from the water with increased wisdom, acquired through a personal revelation (I-Thou) conveyed to Him in prayer.

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