

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, C – January 13, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 825 words

There are many Old Testament types or foreshadowings fulfilled by our Lord as he submits to John's baptism, but I want to focus on one, in particular (at least for this year!): it is the scene of the Israelite's crossing of the Red Sea.¹ You know the story well: how Moses and Pharaoh had sparred – Pharaoh refused to submit to Moses' demands, and several plagues were brought upon Egypt as a result; then, after the Passover, when all the first-born in Egypt were killed, Pharaoh begged Moses and the Israelites to leave; but later, he changed his mind and pursued them as they marched out in the wilderness. Then, of course, they ultimately drowned in a most dramatic way in the Red Sea after the Israelites miraculously crossed dry-shod.²

In our tradition, "Egypt" has always been seen as a symbol of "sin": it was there that the children of Israel were enslaved, not allowed to worship God in freedom, not permitted to be who God made them to be. That is what sin does to us: it enslaves us and takes us away from God and our true selves. The miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, then, with Pharaoh and his armies being drowned in the process, foreshadows baptism, through which one emerges with all one's sin taken away. For the Israelites, the other side of the Red Sea was a new life in freedom, with their past life not only having been left behind but even destroyed. For us, after baptism, not only is our sin forgiven but we are truly made new – we start to be our true selves in God.

It is clear that our Lord did not need to be baptized. He never once sinned, not even in the slightest. Nevertheless, in becoming man in Christ, God's plan was to come down to our level in a way that we could more fully relate to him and accept his love – indeed, his gift of salvation. But he did not do that as a sort of TED conference speaker or guru who would preach a life-plan to us but otherwise remain above us; no – he wanted to identify with us to the full. As St. Paul taught the people of Corinth, "For our sake he made him to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God in him".³ Jesus sought baptism to have full solidarity with us, to help us to relate to him more fully. He leads us by example.

In this regard, Christ fulfills the prophecy spoken by Moses himself, who had led the Israelites to freedom beyond the Red Sea. In the book of Deuteronomy he said, "A prophet like me will the Lord, your God, raise up for you from among your own kindred; that is the one to whom you shall listen".⁴ There had not been a prophet like Moses in those many centuries that intervened, but now Christ appears beside the waters of the Jordan to be baptized, to complete what was foreshadowed by Moses originally; and a voice speaks from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased". At the Transfiguration, later, the Father would speak those same words from heaven over Jesus, adding the command: "Listen to him".⁵

At his baptism, then, our Lord is the "prophet like Moses", who promises to lead us through the waters to a place of freedom, by sharing in our condition. Moses would ultimately be punished and not permitted to enter the Promised Land, as we know, because he had doubted and disobeyed God.⁶ Christ, however, enters the true Promised Land: through his obedience unto death,⁷ he overcomes death and opens the way to life: he unlocks the gates of paradise and offers us the means of arriving there ourselves after our sojourn in this world. And we know that during

¹ Cf. Exodus 14-15.

² Cf. Exodus 7ff.

³ 2 Corinthians 5:21.

⁴ Deuteronomy 18:15.

⁵ Cf., e.g., Matthew 17:5.

⁶ Cf. Numbers 20:11-12.

⁷ Cf. Philippians 2:8.

this sojourn, the means that he gives us are that of taking up our cross and following him, who so completely identified with us to the point of dying not for any failing of his, but for ours.

The opening prayer or Collect of today's Mass so beautifully summarizes these concepts of Christ's solidarity with us, in that succinct style that is part of the genius of our Roman tradition; it bears repeating: "O God, whose Only-Begotten Son has appeared in our very flesh, grant, we pray, that we may be inwardly transformed through him whom we recognize as outwardly like ourselves. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever." God became one of us in Christ, to lead us to his fullness. He leads us by example. Let us thank him today for our own baptism, which has given us a new destiny and a freedom that no money can buy, no guru can teach, and which we could in no way merit.