

BAPTISM OF THE LORD

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In 1977 and again in 2002, the people of Great Britain celebrated important milestones in the life of the ruling monarch, Queen Elizabeth II. For both her Silver and Golden Jubilees, the queen traveled extensively throughout her realm, to the cities, towns and villages in every part of the kingdom. As she did so, the various places she was to visit smartened up their appearance. Buildings were painted inside and out, flags and bunting festooned the streets, red, white and blue were everywhere to be seen, new paths and roads were laid. And even though it is generally thought that the monarchy is a failing institution, nevertheless on these occasions everywhere she went the queen was greeted by large numbers of cheering crowds, jostling to get close, perhaps even to speak to her.

There is something of that atmosphere in this feast of the Baptism of Jesus. Today's readings portray it as a royal visitation of God to his people, a world-changing event. Isaiah gives a description of what used to happen when a king visited his people: everything was done to prepare for the king's arrival. The road along which the king was to travel was made smooth and level – valleys filled in and hills flattened to speed the king's journey and make his way easier. The arrival of the king is regarded as a joyous event, eagerly awaited by his people, joyfully heralded from the mountaintops. The king would come in power – as a victorious warrior. But to his people, he was also a gentle shepherd, caring for the weak and needy – the lambs and mother ewes.

These are the terms in which Jesus' first public appearance is portrayed. Indeed, Luke explicitly quotes this passage from Isaiah when he describes the ministry of John the Baptist: John is the joyful herald preparing the way for the coming of the king. Luke emphasises that there is a feeling of expectancy among the people: the Baptist's ministry has heightened their awareness that something momentous is on the horizon. Then Jesus appears, but he is so superior that John is not even worthy to perform for him the task usually left to slaves: undoing the master's sandals. The contrast is between John's use of water, as a symbolic cleansing, and the deeper reality of baptism by the Holy Spirit and fire, which Jesus brings. The depiction of the Spirit descending on Jesus and the divine voice acclaiming Jesus as his beloved

Son shows that everything Jesus does and says is in the power of God. As Son, Jesus is the most intimate and most perfect agent of God that there can possibly be. To say that Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire is the supreme statement of who Jesus is and what he does: he alone is able to confer the Spirit – the very life of God. He alone is able to purify, to burn away the sin and evil which separate us from God.

Paul spells out what that means for us.: baptism by water and the Spirit purifies us of sin and so makes us heirs to eternal life. This is the revelation of God's grace, God's love. Jesus' baptism helps us to understand the meaning of our own baptism. However, perhaps we need to capture something of the sense of expectation and joy of our baptism, by which the divine King – God himself – comes to us, not to visit, but to remain with us. Through baptism, we too have become the sons and daughters of God, his very own people, his beloved, on whom his favour rests.

The Spirit given to us empowers us to be kingly, as Isaiah describes kingship: being victorious in the struggle with evil in ourselves and in our world: but also being pastoral – true shepherds to the weak, the poor, the needy. We can prepare for our kingly role by determining to reclaim our own baptism – that the Spirit's vitality and power may be stirred up and renewed within us, so that like Christ, we can work for God's kingdom, know him as our loving Father, and offer our lives in service of others.