

Reflection for the Feast of the Lord's Baptism

In today's gospel Jesus joins the crowds heading to the river Jordan to be baptised by John. At this point he's just an ordinary individual who doesn't stand out in the crowd. However, that is about to change as Jesus embarks on his public ministry. When his turn for baptism comes, John recognises him and "*would have prevented him*" from being baptised. Why? John's statement that "*I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?*" indicates that he recognises Jesus as the one "*who is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.*" He feels that Jesus' should not be submitting to his ministry. Jesus offers re-assurance to John but, because we do not share the same religious heritage, the words he uses are somewhat lost on us. How are we to understand his words "*for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness*"? Those words are just a riddle to us!

'Righteousness' is a precise Jewish concept which describes the nature of the relationship between God and his people. In the Old Testament God himself is described as "*righteous*" which meant that God had bound himself to his people of his own free will in an unbreakable covenant and, therefore, that he would always be faithful to his promises, to his love, compassion and solicitous care. In turn God's people must act "*righteously*", that is be faithful to their religion, to the law of Moses, to their neighbours and to God. In the life and ministry of Jesus which is about to commence, God's commitment to his people and the perfect, faithful response of the people to God will be brought together in the most perfect expression. The saving death and life-giving resurrection of his "*beloved Son*" will be the ultimate expression of God's loving commitment to his people. The submission of Jesus the man to God's will is the ultimate expression of faithful response. In this way Jesus is "*fulfilling all righteousness*" and Jesus calls upon John to play his part in the inauguration of this new era.

Jesus' baptism is also accompanied by a special manifestation of the Holy Trinity. St Matthew suggests that only Jesus was privy to this. However, the heavens opening, and "*the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him*" coupled with "*a voice from heaven saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'*" mark out the baptism of Jesus as a definitive moment. In this event Jesus leaves his quiet life behind and steps out of the crowd and he is marked out for his special ministry. And this ministry is shown to enjoy the approval of the Father who is "*well pleased*" with his "*beloved Son.*"

Today, in coming forward for baptism Jesus roots his ministry within God's established relationship with his people. He is shown as the fulfilment of all that has gone before and he receives the resounding endorsement of God himself.