

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord C:  
January 12, 2024  
*Amazing Jordan!*

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord; Jesus is baptized by St. John the Baptist at the River Jordan. Now today, if you mention the name *Jordan*, I think most people will think of the super-athlete Michael Jordan, who has been acclaimed as one of the greatest basketball players of all time. What I find so interesting about this man is that, in the midst of grave, personal difficulties, he decided to follow a dream, retire from basketball, and go into baseball. And he did it with rather some success. How many people could do that, I wonder? Finally, having gone into retirement from basketball, he came out of retirement and led the Chicago Bulls to three championships in 1996, '97, and '98, and also won an NBA record himself. He went back into a second retirement and then, came back to basketball with the Washington Wizards in 2001 to win two more NBA seasons. (1) All in all, we're talking about a dedicated and determined man, no? Not a bad reason to remember the name *Jordan*?

But for us, Catholics, and, indeed, for all Christians and for all Jewish faithful, there is another *Jordan* that is even more important, though we may not know it. In the next few pages, we will try to find out the history of that fateful name.

Today we meet the strange man, John the Baptist, the cousin of the Lord, who is baptizing at the River Jordan. There is an old hymn, a Spiritual that says something to the effect that the River Jordan is *deep and wide*. I have been to that river, and, except for the times when the river is at flood stage, it is really neither. To all intents and purposes, to the naked eye, this little river would seem to be quite insignificant. But history has something else to say about the Jordan River.

Do you remember the great tale of Joshua, the same Joshua, who, with the Israelites, aided solely by the Ark of the Covenant, by their voices and thunderous trumpeting of horns, brought down the great walled city of Jericho? (Is it a coincidence that 'Joshua' is the Hebrew/Aramaic equivalent of Jesus [YHWH is salvation]?) And, it was at this place, where John was baptizing that Joshua will, with the aid of the Ark of the Covenant, part the waters of the Jordan River, so that the Israelites can cross from one side of the river to the other to begin their siege of the city of Jericho.

Some six hundred years later, we find two of the greatest prophets of Israel, Elijah and Elisha, here, in almost exactly the same spot, where John is calling all to be baptized. As we read in II Kings:

*"Elijah said to Elisha: 'Please say here, the Lord has sent me on to Jordan.' 'As the Lord lives, and as you, yourself live,' Elisha replied, 'I will not leave you.' And so the two went on together... Elijah took his mantle, rolled it up and struck the water, which divided, and both crossed on dry ground." (II Kings 2. 6, 8)*

Any faithful Jewish man looking at the River Jordan now or at the time of John the Baptist, could not but help think of the partings of the water done miraculously in the past by the Ark of the Covenant in the time of Joshua or by the mantle of Elijah. That John the Baptist meets and calls forth *the Lamb of God at this place* was certainly no accident on the part of God.

With the coming of Jesus to the Jordan River to meet His cousin, John, to be baptized, there is going to be a new *parting of the water*, unlike the world has ever seen, or shall ever see again. Listen to the words of St. Maximus of Turin, (Bishop, + c. 465) from a sermon taken from the Office of Matins from Friday after Epiphany:

Someone might ask, 'Why would a holy man desire baptism?' Listen to the answer: Christ is baptized, not to be made holy by the water, but to make the water holy, and by His cleansing to purify the waters which He touched. For the consecration of Christ involves a more significant consecration of the water. For when the Saviour is washed all water for our baptism is made clean, purified at its source for the dispensing of baptismal grace to the people of future ages. Christ is the first to be baptized, then, so that Christians will follow after Him with confidence. (2)

St. John explains to his followers: *"He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire."* (St. Luke 3. 16) What is the meaning of this *Spirit and fire*? As we said in an earlier homily, John's baptism was a sort of sacramental, a pledge of good will on man's part to turn to God, and, therefore, certainly, that baptism would cause the Lord to look favourably on the one who received it. But the Baptism of Christ is another thing; it is a sacrament – it forgives sin, it heals, burns away sin, it *cauterizes*, if you will. As we read in our second reading, St. Paul's letter to Titus: *"When the kindness and generous love of God our Saviour appeared, not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of His mercy, He saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewed us by the Holy Spirit."* (Titus 3. 4-5) Fr. Munachi E. Ezeogu, C.S.S.P. points out, rather intriguingly:

Here we see the meaning of grace. G-R-A-C-E spells God's Riches At Christ's Expense. The salvation we have received is not in payment for any good works we might have done but a free and unconditional gift of God. In baptism God wipes away all our sins and no longer holds us accountable for them. (3)

Certainly the Judaism of John and Jesus' day were familiar with baptisms of various sorts. John's baptism was different, in that it included an oral *and personal* confession of sin. And yet, with all of that, it was still only a sacramental, a pledge of good will on the part of man. That is, it did not effect a forgiveness of sin. That is why it was necessary for Christ to come so that, in the words of John, a *new Baptism, one of Spirit and fire*, that would not only symbolize but actually *cause* a forgiveness of sin. And it had to be done... by Whom?

Who else, considering where they were? The new... *Joshua, Jesus!* Jesus' descent into the water is an act of solidarity with all mankind, as Pope Benedict points out to us: "The act of descending into the waters of this Baptism implies a confession of guilt and a plea for forgiveness in order to make a new beginning. In a world marked by sin, then, this Yes to the entire will of God also expresses solidarity with men, who have incurred guilt but yearn for righteousness." (4) To put it another way, listen to Bishop Sheen:

He had no sin to repent of and no sin to be washed away. But He was identifying Himself with sinners all the same. When He went down into the river Jordan to be baptized, He made Himself one with sinners. The innocent can share the burdens of the guilty. If a husband is guilty of a crime, it is pointless to tell his wife not to worry about it, or that it is no concern of hers. It is equally absurd to say that Our Lord should not have been baptized because He had no personal guilt. If He was to be identified with humanity, so much so to call Himself the 'Son of Man,' then He had to share the guilt of humanity. And this was the meaning of the baptism of John. (5)

Might we say that, with John's baptism there was the sharing in guilt and darkness, but the Baptism which Christ gives is, as John said, the light of the "*Spirit and fire?*"

And when Jesus emerges from the water, parting the water not with the Ark of the Covenant or the rolled mantle of Elijah but with His Body which is the New Ark of the Covenant, the Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends upon Him, and the voice of the Father is heard: "*You are My Beloved Son; with You I am well pleased!*" (St. Luke 3. 22) With the appearance of the *dove* and the sound of the Voice of the Father we see the emergence of an idea of the Trinity. We will hear those words of the Father to Jesus again, later on in His ministry, close to the moment when He is to be immolated on the Cross.

And what about that mysterious figure of the dove, hovering over the figure of Jesus and brooding, once again as of old, over the face of the waters? To understand the full import of the figure of the dove, the Holy Spirit, we turn to another

bishop and Doctor of the ancient Church, St. Peter Chrysologus, (+ c. 450, his name, Chrysologus, means golden-worded – he is the Doctor of homilies, which you will see for obvious reasons):

Today the Holy Spirit hovers over the waters in the likeness of a dove. A dove announced to Noah that the flood had disappeared from the earth; so now a dove is to reveal that the world's shipwreck is at an end forever. The sign is no longer an olive-shoot of the old stock: instead, the Spirit pours out on Christ's head the full richness of a new anointing by the Father, to fulfill what the psalmist had prophesied: *Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows.* (6)

All of this took place in the River Jordan. Did anyone besides Our Lord see the dove or hear the voice of the Father? We cannot really know. Certainly these things were witnessed by St. John, because these were the signs that caused him to know that Jesus, was, in fact, *the Lamb of God*. As John, himself, was to testify, "*I confess I did not know Him, though the very reason I came baptizing with water was that He might be revealed to Israel... but I did not recognize Him... Now I have seen for myself and have testified, 'This is God's Chosen One!'*" (St. John 1. 31, 33a, 34)

As I said, all of this took place on the *River Jordan*. So, the next time you hear the name *Jordan*, now you can think of two amazing things: an amazing athlete, and that wild place where our salvation began.

1. Michael Jordan – Wikipedia – the free encyclopedia
2. St. Maximus of Turin, Office of Matins, Friday after Epiphany
3. Fr. Munachi E. Ezeogu, C.S.S.P., Sunday Homilies for Year C, *Homily for the Baptism of the Lord – based on the Epistle, from internet*
4. His Holiness, Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Doubleday, New York, 2007, pg. 17
5. Archbishop F. J. Sheen, *Life of Christ*, McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc., New York, 1958, pgs. 54-55
6. St. Peter Chrysologus, Bishop and Doctor of Church, Office of Matins, Monday after Epiphany