

Once upon a time, long ago, in a parish far, far away a wonderful woman approached me after mass with a question. Now this woman, elderly, had raised a few kids, sent them off to Manogue, one even became a nun...so this is someone well grounded in the Catholic Faith. She approached me and said "Fr. Bob, you said Jesus was Jewish. Did he become a Catholic after his baptism?"

Sometimes our grasp, our expectations of our faith, our understanding of the faith may be off. Sometimes what we think we know, is not really what is to be known.

I was answering questions from kids this week; wanting to know if I have a wife and kids, what my real name is...so clearly their expectations are a little off.

Now for this woman, the thought would have not changed her approach to God and living out the faith, whether she understood Jesus as Catholic or as Jew (which he was). But sometimes what we think we know can hinder our living out the faith.

Many of us learn the faith as children. We are taught or were taught by catechists in the parish, by our parents and family; maybe we had religion in Catholic school. Often these are taught by well intentioned volunteers that pass on what they were probably taught by their own parents, volunteers and so on. And sometimes though what is taught and passed on is not always accurate; or maybe not complete.

One of the old beliefs that was never Catholic teaching and has been repeatedly dispelled, but yet still seems to hang on, especially with an older crowd: we must baptize babies so that in case they die they will get into heaven and not spend eternity in limbo.

First of all, limbo is not in our teaching. There is heaven and hell, and as Catholics we get purgatory, which eventually leads to heaven.

Second, do we also know that baptism is not necessary for "heaven." Shocker... if a person is non-baptized, yet a good and loving person, true to our human nature, will God exclude them because they don't belong to the correct group? Now, is that unnerving some of us?

Yet the real meaning, the power, the beauty of Baptism is not in getting into Heaven.

The Baptism of the Lord, Luke's version, is wonderful. First, note it is not just Jesus getting Baptized, he is with others. So this is not a private ceremony on a Saturday afternoon, this is a communal event.

We also know that for John the Baptist, his baptism was a public statement that a person makes that they are going to reform their lives, take a new direction, they are going to repent.

So what is Jesus doing if he is the Son of God, if he is Sinless?

Jesus is in the water with these sinners, these people, even though he is without sin. Jesus is with the people, amid their sinfulness. He is not avoiding them, nor judging and punishing them.

Jesus is with the people, as they desire to change their lives, to walk with them and be with them as they walk. Jesus will guide us to the Father in this life, in the here and now.

Baptism becomes transformed from an action of the people to an action of God for the people. It becomes the Sacrament. It signifies God's presence with people, with us. It signifies our openness to have God in our lives and our desire to be in relationship with God.

This relationship with God, who by nature is relational, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, brings us to fullness of life. It changes our lives in a completely different way. In Jesus, we find the way to God, not just in heaven, but now, here.

This will change all expectations. The people expect John as the Messiah, with his fiery rhetoric, his call to an ethic, his wild lifestyle. "Yet, he will say, I am not he".

The Messiah who walks among the people, who will be the one who heals, who welcomes, who forgives, who touches the leper; who dies on a cross. The Messiah will be the one who rises from the dead.

This will change all expectations.

Peter will get it too and will be changed. In Acts we see this. He understands that God is for all persons, not just the Jews. Peter goes to the Roman house, Cornelius, experiences God's love with this pagan, with this member of the oppressing class, and Peter gets this. He sees differently.

We as Catholics, as Christians, have struggled in our 2000 years, because we tend to want to cling to ways that work for us, that do not conform to Gospel values and teachings. They may make sense in our logical minds, or our limited spirituality, but do not reflect the power of God. We still want to make God vengeful. We hold onto these notions we must appease God through our prayers, our disciplines, our mortifications.

The Baptism of the Lord makes a powerful statement of God's intent: Not to punish us, not to get back at us, not to brow beat us, nor guilt and shame us. God walks with us. God remains with us. God loves us.

This is confirmed in the Resurrection, when after humanity executes Jesus; the Father returns him to us again. With words of peace and mission.

God loves us, even when we are at our worst, God, in Jesus is right there in the worst of it, calling us to move forward; guiding us ahead, "take one more step, this is not the end. You are loved and forgiven."

This bothers people. How can God love me, a sinner? How can God love me even when I am being so hateful towards others, greedy, holding onto my anger and resentments?

And yet God is; that is our Faith. Jesus reveals this.

Every now and then I think we need our little world's rocked up. We can become too comfortable in our individual understanding of what the faith is.

We need a challenge to how we perceive ourselves, our faith, life.

And when we open ourselves to the challenge, to the power and beauty of Jesus Christ, we will be transformed; strengthened, purified maybe, renewed.

Our awareness of how God operates and lives in our own lives can increase.

And as our awareness grows, so does our sense of closeness to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.