

### ***Dead to Sin, Alive to God***

In the name of him who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and with fire, dear friends in Christ: Late in his earthly ministry, the disciples James and John approached the Lord Jesus with a request. They wanted to be seated at his right and left hands when he entered into his kingdom. In reply Jesus asked them, "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" "We can," they answered.

It was one of those incidents in the Scripture in which someone says something that turns out to be correct, but not at all in the sense they are thinking when they say it. A good example is at the trial of Jesus. Pontius Pilate doesn't want to crucify the Lord. He knows that Jesus has done nothing wrong. But Pilate is being pressured by the Jewish leaders. He fears that a bloody riot will take place if he doesn't do what they want. In the end, he takes a basin of water and washes his hands in front of them. He says, "You take him and crucify him. I am innocent of this man's blood." The Jewish leaders and the crowd reply, "Let his blood be on us and our children." What they mean is that they'll accept the blame. That's what they're thinking when they say it. And yet, in a greater sense, that's exactly what they should want: the blood of Jesus on them and their children for that is what takes away their sin – they just don't know it yet.

A similar thing is going on with James and John. When Jesus speaks of the cup he's going to drink and the baptism he's about to undergo, he's talking about his upcoming passion when he will be arrested, beaten, and tortured to death by crucifixion all while bearing the weight of the world's sin. The two disciples think he is talking about having a cup of wine and taking a bath in water. "Sure", they say, "we can drink your cup and take your baptism." They have no idea how wrong-headed they are. And yet, Jesus tells them that they are absolutely right. He says to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with."

The reason Jesus can say that is because Christian Baptism is where the great exchange first takes place. To say it another way: Jesus' Baptism is our Baptism, and our Baptism is Jesus' Baptism. What does that mean? It means that when you were baptized with water and the Word, what happened to Jesus in his two Baptisms that form the bookends of his entire ministry, the one at the Jordan River when he first identified himself with fallen sinners and the one at Calvary when he suffered and died on the cross as *the* sinner, also happened to you. That's what it means in Baptism to "put on Christ", or "to be born again in Christ". God the Father looks at you and sees Jesus and what happened to him. So, Baptism is a very concrete application of the work of Jesus to you personally. In your Baptism, God the Father points at you individually and says, "Fear not, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name. You are mine." It's a wonderful comfort. God gives you an event in your life, a date and a time just for you that you can always point to and say, "God told me that I belong to him. He delights in me. He holds me and my life in his hand, and he will protect me from harm and every danger."

Unfortunately, for a large part of the Christian Church, Baptism is held to be only an empty symbol. It's thought to be just an act of submission to God who commands Baptism as a legal ordinance. "Do it because I told you to." In that sense your Baptism is to your Christian faith what your driver's license is to your ability to drive. You can operate a vehicle without it just fine, only not legally. So it should not surprise us that many of those who hold such a view

of Baptism have to look for the gifts that Baptism gives in other places. For example, sometimes they look for “proof” of their salvation by searching for a special feeling in their heart, or for proof that the Holy Spirit is present in them by their making incomprehensible sounds with their mouths that they call “speaking in tongues”.

But with Holy Scripture, we understand God’s purpose in Baptism to be so much more than to provide you a license to legally operate as a Christian. To extend the analogy, your Baptism is your license, and the car, and the title, and the keys, and the gas, and the maintenance, and a complete and comprehensive insurance package. No, it doesn’t absolutely guarantee that you won’t drive off the road or get lost from time to time; but it does give you everything you need to get back and moving on the right path again. No matter how bruised a reed you become, or how dimly your lamp glows, God promises in your Baptism that he will not break you or snuff out your flame. Only you can do that by rejecting the gifts that God gives in Baptism.

Because this is true, Baptism is one of the most precious treasures that God has given us. And so today, as we celebrate the first Baptism of Jesus, we will do well to consider a little more deeply what it means to say that his Baptism is our Baptism.

It means first that Jesus’ death is your death. St. Paul writes, “Don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?” In Baptism, you are united to the total rejection of God that Jesus suffered on the cross when he died for the sin of the world. You deserved that rejection because of your sin. But in Baptism, because Jesus’ death is your death, God sees you die for your sin. Penalty paid. And now, today, we revisit our Baptism every time we confess our sins. In confession God sees the sinner in us die again with Christ, and so once again, the penalty is paid and justice is served.

Next it means that Jesus’ burial is your burial. Paul writes, “ We were therefore *buried* with him through baptism into death ...” You recall that when God told Adam he would die, he told him also that he would have to return to the dust from which he was taken. In burial, the body returns to the dust as is required by God’s decree. In Baptism your body is “buried with Christ in water”, so to speak. In some churches this is represented by complete immersion in the water. But whether immersed or not, in Baptism God sees your lifeless body, an empty shell of earth, sealed in the garden tomb with Christ – not to decay, but lovingly wrapped in spices like myrrh, aloe, and cassia to await its spiritual reawakening.

And that is what comes next, because your Baptism means that Jesus’ resurrection is your resurrection. Paul writes, “Just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.” Resurrection is the recreation or the rebirth of a new person from the dust of the old. In today’s Old Testament reading, the Lord reminds us that it was he “who created and formed us.” His purpose is to tell us that because he did it once before, we can be sure that he is more than able to do it again. And in Baptism he breathes again into the lifeless body that was buried with Christ; but there’s a difference -

Because your Baptism also means that Jesus’ Spirit is your Spirit. On Pentecost, Peter told the repentant crowd, “Be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Just as the Holy Spirit descended on Christ as he came up out of the water, so also he came upon you, and took up residence within you as you were taken up from the font. Even today, the Holy Spirit works within you to warn, admonish, correct, and encourage you on your way as you walk in the

righteous path to which you have been called; as he says through Isaiah, "I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by your hand and I preserve you."

And you can be sure that he will continue to preserve you because your Baptism also means that Jesus' Sonship is your sonship. Because you were baptized into Jesus, the Father's word's, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" were spoken to you. It is your guarantee that God will always treat you as a child and an heir of his Kingdom.

Therefore as God's children and heirs, we make it our goal to please him. The Lord did not save us from sin and its consequences so that we could go back to being slaves to sin and continue to serve only ourselves, but rather to free us from sin's bondage. Sin always results in death. Who wants to go back to that? But in Baptism you already died and were raised again with Christ. You were given a new life. Live that new life. It's not impossible; it's simply being what God has made you. Thus as Paul says, consider yourself dead to sin. When temptation comes, be a corpse – a corpse that cannot respond. And consider yourself instead to be alive to God in Christ. For by virtue of your Baptism, that is what you are in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***