

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius

A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord
January 13, 2019

+

You know Our Lord Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins, six months apart in age. The Bible never tells us, but there must have been family gatherings. The great painters of fine art have drawn beautiful portraits of these two chubby boys, often with their mothers, at various stages in their young lives. You can see one of these in the Gardner Museum by a Renaissance painter named Bonifacio De'Pitati.

Scripture tells us John's parents were very old, and when they died John went off into the desert of Judaea to live the life of a solitary ascetic. But people were attracted to John and came from all over the nation to hear him preach.

John the Baptist used water from the Jordan River for baptism. He baptized those who heard him preach the necessity of repentance and amendment of life. They made their confessions and then water baptism was the cleansing sign of a changed heart and life.



One day towards the end of John's famous ministry, Jesus of Nazareth closed up the carpenter's shop in Nazareth and left town. A few fine art painters have portrayed this sad day for His mother Mary, who was probably a widow by then. And there is a fine woodcut by Albrecht Durer. The Bible does not record this event either, but in my mind I see Our Lady walking her Son to the edge of town, and after goodbyes and a last wave from Him down the road, she went home alone.

Several days later the Gospel tells us Almighty God stood in a queue of those waiting to see John the Baptist. This is a breathtakingly understated comment! Remember the New Testament exists because Christ is Risen. And with no explanation at all here is the Son of God presenting Himself as a candidate for baptism and waiting to make His confession! We do not know what Jesus confessed but how could it be anything but a *true* confession showing His interior life? What we *do* know is that John the Baptist recoiled from the revealed holiness. John said, "I need to be baptized by You."

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord
January 13, 2019

+

Keep your focus on the complete picture and don't romanticize it. Remember that stained glass windows were invented to educate those who couldn't read. Jesus standing in line is about as romantic as people waiting for a bus on Boylston Street! The Gospel does not assert Jesus arrived in a shiny black limousine drawing forty feet of water and went to the head of the line! Rather, here is Jesus the Sinless One, standing amid all sorts of fallen men and women: robbers, adulterers, prostitutes, soldiers who had raped and pillaged, and hard-hearted Pharisees. (Maybe the people waiting for the Boylston Street bus are a better lot!) But here in the same queue was the Immaculate Son of God. It is what Isaiah had foretold long ago: "He was numbered with the transgressors." *53:12* For Jesus to be there in that line is a great sign of God's merciful love for penitents. Our Lord is very close to Catholics on Saturdays when they wait in the chapel sorrowing for sins and waiting for confession.

The confessional in St Theresa's Church is arranged in such a way both the priest and penitent can look at a framed copy of Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*. Here is the wayward son returned and kneeling before his forgiving father. And it is one of Our Lord's most beloved parables. But *Jesus Himself* at the Jordan is an even more powerful sign of God's merciful love for penitents. Many of those fine art painters have portrayed Jesus *in the water* with John the Baptist. But Jesus *waiting in line* is the image we need to cherish. Here is the Holy God, standing with fallen human nature, to receive the baptism of repentance He doesn't need *but they do*. Here is God's Beloved Son, "the pioneer and perfecter" of the way we should go. *Hebrews 12:2*

So the Lord did not accept John's recoiling from the Presence of Holiness and the very thought of baptizing God's Own Son. The gospel gives us that part of the confession. Jesus said, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Let that motto include us. *It is fitting* for you and me to begin the work of fulfilling all righteousness by means of the grace Jesus has provided by His Own humility. Our Lord is waiting to communicate His righteousness to our souls. The Gospel at today's Mass lays out everything in order: the first step is repentance for sin. Then God will proclaim us His children by adoption and grace, and the Holy Ghost will come upon us in greater measure. It is indeed fitting for us to aim at fulfilling all righteousness. Jesus Himself has made it fitting, and it is why He came to us.