

Feast of the Epiphany -- Baptism: Crowning Back into the Original Glory

Contributed by H.G. Bishop Youssef
 Thursday, 17 January 2008
 Last Updated Monday, 21 January 2008

"Purify our bodies; wash us from our iniquities; make us worthy of the dwelling of Your Holy Spirit in our souls. Enlighten our minds that we may behold Your praiseworthiness. Purify our thoughts and mingle us with Your Glory..." (Fraction to the Son)

Introduction

On the tenth of Tobe, two weeks following the Nativity Feast, the Coptic Orthodox Church celebrates the glorious Feast of Epiphany; the occasion of the baptism of our Lord Jesus Christ in the waters of the Jordan River.

What is Baptism?

Baptism is a one-time performance in a Christians life that leads to a life-time dedication to a single purpose which is devotion to God the Father, Christ, the Savior, and the Holy Spirit the Comforter. It is a holy Mystery that no mind can fully fathom.

When we get immersed in the baptismal fountain, we get immersed into the power and promise of Christ. Our sins become forgiven by the goodness of God, the Father, and the grace of the Holy Spirit. As we come out of the fountain of baptism we get united with the Lord Jesus Christ; and through this Holy Sacrament; we become worthy of the Holy Spirit. At this point, the Holy Spirit confirms us restoring us into the image and likeness of God; and returning us to our original state, unblemished and without sin. Thus, we are crowned back into mans original glory.

The Ante-Nicene father Tertullian (c.198) wrote that baptism is a precursor to internal peace,

"The dove of the Holy Spirit flies to earth, that is, to our flesh as it emerges from the fontbringing us the peace of God, sent out from the Heavens."

Father Tadros Malaty writes, "When we come out of the fountain, we put on 'Christ our Savior' as an incorruptible garment, thus we become worthy of the gift of the Holy Spirit who renews us and seals us. The Holy Scripture in the Holy Book of Galatians 3:28 documented that many put on the Lord Jesus Christ as they were baptized."

The Nature of the Crown

The Crown of Glory is not something alien to man; since he was created in the image and likeness of the Creator with full dominion and authority over all the creatures around him. However, Adam, through disobedience, had lost that Crown of Glory. God, in His mercy, sent His Son Jesus Christ to die on Adams behalf. It is by the Spirit of God that we are crowned back into mans original glory, retrieving the condition in which we were in prior to sin. This crowning back into the original glory has been done in order that we may be able to reign with Him, thus receiving Heaven and the heavenly instead of earth and the earthly. The Divine waters of the Holy Sacrament of Baptism extinguish for the human nature, once and for all, the darkness of sin and the fury of Hell.

Being crowned in the original glory has a personal individualistic meaning to each one of us; which is sharing the one human nature in the Lord Jesus Christ. "Therefore there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 4:3:28). This specifically tells us that opinion and ethnic culture ("neither Jew nor Greek"), pride and social standing ("neither slave nor free"), gender ("neither male nor female") have no place in the nature of the Church. As Christians, we all are equal in dignity and self-worth.

St. Paul confirms this, writing, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28).

By adoption, we all become sons of God through the Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Through this adoption, we have become everything God is, except for His Divine nature. Retaining our human nature, we can still become members of His family through Grace. The process of growing in the knowledge of the Lord and His Word is called deification. Deification simply means growing in grace; according to what God is by nature. According to the Churchs teachings, to grow in grace one must believe in and be faithful to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Having recently celebrated the Glorious Feast of the Nativity, we can reflect on the Lord Jesus Christ, born of a woman. Having been born of a woman under the law, the Lord Jesus Christ is in a position where He can redeem those under the law; thus fulfilling Gods promise to Abraham.

Eternal salvation is meant for everyone. "Then St. Peter said to them, 'Repent and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:38-39).

Additional Jewels on the Crown

During the time of the Apostles Church, the Christian life of the new converts had not stopped at participating in the Holy Sacrament of Baptism. Following baptism, new converts were indoctrinated into the life of the Church. We are told, "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). The early days of the Church of Jerusalem were recorded as filled with love, unity, and joy. They shared everything with one accord; regarding their possessions as belonging to God. A life filled with liturgical prayer and partaking of the Holy Communion made this happiness possible.

We should all desire to live fulfilling, fruitful lives of love, unity, and joy within the Church. We are even told there are degrees of spiritual fruitfulness in Matthew 13:23, "But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruits and yields, in one case a hundred fold, in another sixty, and in another thirty."

The time we live in can certainly be called the era of self-help. Self-help books, self-help groups, and self-help materials are promoted everywhere. Everyone is desperately looking for that life of spiritual contentment, fruitfulness and internal peace.

Any Christian, resistant to self-help (i.e. hearing and obeying the Holy Scriptures), is like a rocky soil. No matter how good the quality of the seed that has been planted in their heart, this seed cannot take root in that rocky soil, and will neither grow nor reproduce. Consequently, their life will be neither fruitful nor productively benefiting from God's Word. If your heart is open, as were the New Testament Christians, filled with the Holy Spirit, praying at regular hours with the Agpeya, partaking of the Holy Communion, and in fellowship with one another, the question will no longer be, "How can I be fruitful; but rather, how fruitful can I become?"

As we celebrate the Glorious Feast of the Epiphany, let us remember what St. Marcarius the Great wisely said:

"The earth could not be healed of such a great and invisible plaque by any medications of her own, that is, by righteous actions proceeding only from her; but by the heavenly Divine nature of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Only with this medication, man could find treatment and live having his heart cleared by the Holy Spirit."

Blessed is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world and crowned man into his original glory. Glory, honor, and worship to our Lord God now and forever more to the end of ages. Amen.

Bishop Youssef,
Bishop, Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States