

**COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SUNDAY, JAN. 9, 2005
(Baptism of the Lord; Isa 42:1-4; Ps 29; Acts 10:34-38; Matt 3:13-17)**

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That Jesus was baptized by John is certain, and demonstrates his humanity, which “grew in wisdom, stature and grace (or favor),” Luke 2:52. The coexistence of Jesus’ full divine nature with this fully human nature is a mystery we will never comprehend, perhaps not even when we see God face to face. But Jesus and the early Christians—the writers of the New Testament— looked to the Jewish Scriptures, what came to be called the “Old Testament,” in order to understand the mystery of Jesus, the Word of God made flesh.

Jesus, a pious Jew (Matt 9:20 indicates he wore the tassels [*tzitzit*] required by Numbers 15:37 on his clothing), heeded John the Baptist’s message that God was coming to visit his people and that they must be prepared. In humility, he went to be baptized along with other Jews. Philippians 2:6-8 tells of Christ’s emptying himself of divine prerogatives and assuming the form of a slave or servant. Jesus assumed the role of the “Suffering Servant” of Isaiah, who carries the sins of others and dies as a sacrificial offering, Isa 53. The words from heaven heard at his baptism echo the “sacrifice of Isaac,” Gen 22, and the first poem of the Suffering Servant, Isa 42. This may give us a clue as to the meaning of Jesus’ statement to John that “it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” “Righteousness,” an specially important word in Matthew’s gospel, is closely related in the Hebrew Scriptures to salvation (see, e.g., Isa 54:17; 56:1; cf. Rom 3:21-26). Jesus is fulfilling God’s plan of salvation by himself being baptized in the Jordan River, sanctifying its waters and signaling the final exodus of the people of God from slavery to the freedom of the children of God who enter the Promised Land.

The second reading shows how the early Church experienced that the Holy Spirit could be given to Gentiles (non-Jews) also, and that therefore they, too, were eligible for baptism.