

Sunday Homily

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

10 JANUARY 2021

YEAR B

DIVINE OFFICE WEEK I

“Someone is following me, someone who is more powerful than I am.”

Illustration

In 1947 a young Bedouin shepherd boy stumbled across a cave in the desert of Judaea. Inside the cave was a jar, and inside the jar was a scroll. Over the next two years, more and more scrolls were found and excavations began on a ruin near the same place. This has now become world-famous as the settlement of Qumran, with its Dead Sea Scrolls.

What do these discoveries have to do with us? The Dominican friars who excavated the site, and the scholars who examined the scrolls, concluded that in the period before and during the time of Jesus there had been a monastery of Jewish monks on this site, and they were the writers of the scrolls. The scrolls tell us a great deal about the religious life in Judaea at the time of John the Baptist and Jesus. They are copies of biblical books, and other works that tell us of the prayers of the community and their hopes for the coming Messiah. The monks led a disciplined life of prayer and work, and were obeying the words of the prophet Isaiah, “In the wilderness prepare a way for the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” They were carrying on the tradition of Elijah and Elisha, and the other sons of the prophets.

Gospel Teaching

This is part of the background of John the Baptist. He emerges from the desert wearing a prophet’s habit to announce the arrival of the Messiah. This is why he is so prominent during Advent. But today there is another new beginning, the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus. John, in a way, represents the old covenant, which must now be fulfilled and give way to the new. Elsewhere, John says that he is the friend of the bridegroom, that Jesus must increase and John must decrease; John’s mission is coming to an end as Jesus’ ministry begins: “I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

This being the case, we might wonder why Jesus submits to being baptised by John. We believe not only that Jesus is God, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who creates and sustains everything there is; but also that, as a human, he is sinless, and had no need to wash for repentance. Traditionally, there are two answers to this. First, Jesus wished to be ritually washed by John to show full solidarity with us: like a good leader, he doesn’t ask us to do anything he