

Baptism and Holy Wisdom

A homily preached on January 7, 2001, the feast of the Baptism of Christ.

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Sisters and brothers, the feast of the Baptism of Christ that we celebrate today traditionally is one of a trio of epiphany feasts. All celebrate events in which Jesus' identity and mission were manifested. The other two of course are the Epiphany itself (celebrated yesterday), and the Wedding at Cana – the first of Jesus' signs according to the fourth gospel (which will be celebrated next Sunday).

I would like to suggest that one way of viewing all three of these dominical feasts together – and only one way – is to consider them also to be feasts of holy wisdom.

We are already quite used to referring to the three who came from the east as “wise ones”; they exercised wisdom both in following the star and in their dealings with King Herod. The star that guided them reminds us of holy wisdom herself, for the Wisdom of Solomon states that “Wisdom is radiant and unfading and she is easily discerned by those who love her (Wis 6:12; cf 7:10). In addition, the star in the story of the epiphany played a role similar to that of the pillar of fire in the exodus story. This fire is identified with holy wisdom: “She guided them along a marvelous way and became . . . a starry flame through the night” (Wis 10:17).

Of the three gifts brought to Jesus by the wise ones, we have to admit that the gold is not as important as we might think, for the wisdom books consistently say that wisdom is better than gold (cf Prov 8:19 and elsewhere). The aromatic gifts of frankincense and myrrh, however, may be identified with holy wisdom, for in Sirach she says of herself, “. . . I gave forth perfume, and like choice myrrh I spread my fragrance, . . . like the odor of incense in the tent (Sir 24:15).

Holy wisdom participates in the wedding at Cana in a number of ways. She is herself a banquet-giver; Proverbs tells us that “she has slaughtered her animals [and] set her table” (Prov 9:2). She invites the whole city, crying out, “Come, eat of my bread.” (Prov 9:5). In Sirach holy wisdom herself is the banquet: “Come to me, you who desire me, and eat your fill of my fruit” (Sir 24:19; cf 24:21). Holy wisdom is associated especially with the wine: “She has mixed her wine,” Proverbs says (Prov 9:2), and she invites all to drink: “Come. . . drink of the wine I have mixed” (Prov 9:5). In other passage wisdom herself is the wine: “She inebriates mortals with her fruits” says Sirach (Sir 1:16), and “Those who drink of me will thirst for more” (Sir 1:16). Holy wisdom is sometimes also identified as a bride (Wis 8:2; Sir 15:2). And finally, Mary's discernment and words are practical exercises of wisdom.

Holy wisdom also dances around today's feast of the Baptism of Christ. She is associated with the holy spirit, for the Wisdom of Solomon tells us, “I called on God, and the spirit of wisdom

came to me” (Wis 7:7). And in another place the sage says to God, “Who has learned your counsel, unless you have given wisdom and sent your holy spirit from on high?” (Wis 9:17). Again, the holy spirit of wisdom is clearly described as being sent from heaven. In one place the sage prays to God, “Send her forth from the high heavens and from the throne of your glory send her” (Wis 9:10). And in another place holy wisdom herself “rained down knowledge and discerning comprehension” (Sir 1:19). Finally, the description of Jesus as “the Beloved with [whom God is] well pleased” (Luke 3:22) reminds us first that holy wisdom is both lover and beloved; she says, “I love those who love me” (Prov 8:17). In addition, she herself was “daily [God’s] delight” (Prov 8:30).

This brief, highly selective and quite simplified approach to the three feasts of Christ’s epiphany is intended to stir the imagination and plant seeds for further reflection.

But I am even more interested in what these thoughts might have to do with the meaning of baptism in the church, with its liturgical celebration, and with the lives of baptized persons today. I would therefore like to suggest that holy wisdom be one of the many lenses through which we view baptism (by which I mean the whole of Christian initiation).

Thus if the baptism of Jesus was in some way an event of holy wisdom – that is, if Jesus was baptized into a life-long experience and expression of holy wisdom – then might we not think of Christian baptism along similar lines? What difference might it make – to individuals and to the church – if those of us who are baptized were to appreciate baptismal living as an experience and expression of holy wisdom? What difference might it make if those of us who prepare liturgies of baptism, and who preside at and participate in these liturgies, were to have a greater appreciation of their “wisdom dimension”?

We might think of baptism (in part) somewhat along the following lines. Baptism is entering deeply into solidarity with Christ, who is himself endowed with holy wisdom and himself an expression of holy wisdom. Baptism is entering deeply into the spirit of wisdom, who empowers persons to live lives characterized by the best of the qualities of holy wisdom described in scripture – including justice and concern for all. Baptism is entering in a particular way into friendship with God, for the Wisdom of Solomon says, “Those that get wisdom obtain friendship with God” (Wis 7:14). Baptism is entering into a community that is wisdom’s own household. Here all are teachers and all are learners. Here members are bound to each other by ties of affection and fidelity. Inasmuch as wisdom is variously imaged as bride, wife, lover, mother, nurse and God’s daughter, it is a community in which women are full members, and fully participate in leadership.

Another perspective is to ask: What difference might it make – in our lives and in the life of the church – if our liturgies included references to holy wisdom? For example, we often identify the waters of baptism with those of the Red Sea. Might we not recall that according to the Wisdom of Solomon it was holy wisdom herself who “brought [the people] over the Red Sea and led them through deep waters” (Wis 10:18)? Sirach adds that “She will give [us] the waters of wisdom to drink” (Sir 15:3). And Proverbs states that “the fountain of wisdom is a gushing stream” (Prov

18:4). The prayer that accompanies the post-baptismal anointing in the Roman liturgy images Christ and the baptized in terms of priest, prophet and king. Might it not include wisdom as well? Might not the baptismal garment ritual refer in part to the passage in Sirach that says, “You will wear her [holy wisdom] like a glorious robe and put her on like a splendid crown” (Sir 6:31)?

Today we can only scratch the surface. However I invite you to reflect further on this matter, in mind and in heart, as you have time. For those who are baptized, I ask: How might the lens of holy wisdom affect your own self-understanding as a baptized person, and that of the church?

Now let us continue our worship, in peace and in wisdom.

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