**Is 42.1-9; Ps 29; Acts 10.34-43; Mt 3.13-17**

An atheist named Robert lived in a small Christian village. During lent on every Friday he would grill a deer and the whole village could smell it. After a few years the village elders got together and decided that, “we must tell him to stop it, and if possible we must try to convert him.”

The elders eventually convinced Robert to convert and spent a year helping him prepare for his baptism. At the baptism the priest blessed Robert and sprinkled some water on him and said "Robert, you were born an atheist and raised an atheist and now you are a Christian!"

Everyone celebrated his conversion and they thought that they would not smell meat grilling on the Fridays of Lent. Well, when the first Friday of Lent came, the villagers smelled meat grilling, and they ran over to stop him. As they approached his yard, they saw Robert sprinkling the deer with water and saying, "You were born a deer, raised a deer and now you are a Salmon!"

The response of Robert in this story compels me to examine the relevance of Baptism in today’s context. I would like to understand Baptism as an experience of the coming of God into our life, and an act of manifesting Jesus in our daily life. Although it is performed as a religious rite, for us it is the visible sign of the invisible grace of God in our life. Now, let us make an attempt to understand the religious, historical and cosmological significance of Baptism

**1, Religious significance**

 According the Jewish religious tradition baptism was given only to the proselytes from other faiths, and it was not meant to the Jews as they considered themselves as God’s chosen people. In this context, Jesus’ submission to this religious rite poses a question; why did Jesus submit himself to this rite.?

Its answer depicts a glorious spirituality which is embedded in the love of Jesus and his redeeming grace. Jesus was like all of us except sin. Yet he identified himself with sinful humankind and took away the sins of the world by taking them upon himself. He underwent this religious rite not for the forgiveness of his sins, but for the forgiveness of our sins. In order to accomplish this mission Jesus Christ emptied himself and took the form of a slave.

Today’s first reading gives us the picture of the servant of the Lord whom he has chosen. This servant has been anointed by his Spirit to bring light to the nations, to give sight to the blind and freedom to captives. He will fulfil the mission of the Lord with humble and silent way and manifest the righteousness of the Lord.

In the picture of the servant of the Lord we can see the suffering nature which manifests the most characteristic qualities of Lord’s chosen people. Here the servant of the Lord is asked to fulfil two missions; the first one is to renew the covenant with Israel and the second is to establish a true spirituality amidst the pagan nations. When this new spirituality is established; the blind (the pagan) will see the light of revelation and the prisoners (the Israelites in exile) will regain their freedom. That means; the Jews and the pagans will accept the new spirituality which is built by the new covenant, and they will live as members of one family under heaven.

In the second reading Peter makes very clear that all people of good will are qualified to welcome the offer of a new spiritual family. When everyone come forward to do good will, sin will run away from the world. Therefore, we can say that Baptism is an entrance to the forgiveness of sin, and an experience of accepting God’s call to the manifestation of His love.

**2, Historical Significance**

We can see some Jewish historical similarities in today’s gospel. Matthew had given parallel connections enormously throughout his gospel. It was very receptive to any Jewish reader or hearer. His gospel reveals that just as the Israelite boys in Egypt were massacred by the Pharaoh, the boys in Bethlehem were massacred by the king Herod. Just as the Israelites wandered 40 years in the wilderness, Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. Just as the exodus community received The Law from Moses, Jesus gave his Law – Kingdom concerns. And just as the Israelites passed through the Jordan River to the promised land, Jesus passed through the Jordan River by identifying himself with humankind to his kingdom movement.

 The Gospels show that baptism was occurring on the edge of wilderness. People went out from populated places to the wild location of John the Baptist, who presided over baptisms at the River Jordan. John was crying out in the wilderness over the water.

Matthew gives us this baptism account as an experience of the manifestation of God at the River Jordan. The presence of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ at the River Jordan gives us a great message that the world of the divine comes down to the human world in and through Jesus Christ. It helps us see God in history and manifest the presence of God in history through our spiritual life.

**3, Cosmological Background**

Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan inspires me to understand of baptism in a time when waters of Earth and all other resources of nature are under tremendous stress. The cosmic significance of Jesus’ baptism can inform the personal and ecclesial interpretations of baptism that could highlight the sacramentality of nature.

John Hart, in his book, “Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics” describes Water as earth’s life blood. In his words, water is the life-giving and life-sustaining substance for all living beings on Earth. With this image Hart alludes to the vital importance of water for Christian spirituality as well as to water’s indispensable role in sustaining life on planet Earth. However, today we see, earth’s life-giving waters are under stress. Pollution, privatization, overconsumption, diversion, and desertification, all these issues affect the water circulation system that sustains human life and all other life on the planet.

Baptism leads us into Christ experience, and through which we are invited to see the abundant blessings that overflow from God to humans and to the whole earth like water streaming down. This beautiful image we can see in Psalm 104.

You, O God,

lay the beams of your chambers in the waters above;

you make the clouds your chariot;

you ride on the wings of the wind.

You make springs gush forth in the valleys;

they flow between the hills,

giving drink to every wild animal;

By the streams the birds of the air have their home;

they sing among the branches.

From your lofty home you water the mountains;

the earth is satisfied with the fruitfulness of your creation.

Psalm 104 leads us into a prayer that sees the ecologically flourishing, water-nourished landscape as a glorious sign of God's overflowing blessings on the earth. In baptism we are invited into such vision that sees in the life-giving waters of the earth the promise of God in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In this age of ecological emergency, our prayers and study about the sacramental meaning of baptism must draw us deeper into the earth spirituality. Baptism in water, water drawn from the earth’s lifeblood, connects us intimately to the material elements upon which humans and all living beings depend for survival. We must know that the sacramental connection between the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the resources of nature that function for us as signs of God’s saving and sanctifying work in Jesus. This sacramental connection with nature set forth a moral vision for the Christian life. Therefore, let us pray that, may our baptismal experience empower us to be God’s faithful servants to care for the earth with divine wisdom, and manifest God’s love in our daily life. **Amen.**