

**Homily for January 9, 2005  
Baptism of the Lord Year A**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**Isaiah 43:1-4, 6-7**

**Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 9-10**

**Acts 10:34-38**

**Matthew: 3:13-17**

## *It has been said that, to have Christianity, you need three things: bread, wine and a river.*

That's it – water, baptism. It's a universal symbol either of creation or destruction. We know about the destruction, big time these last weeks. The earthquake-generated tidal waves in Southeast Asia are overwhelming in their magnitude of destruction.

But water creates as well. It gives life to the soil, causes things to grow. Water quenches our thirst. It brings refreshment from the heat, enlivens us in play at beaches. We bathe in water. We began our existence in an ocean of embryonic water within the womb, and out of the water we were born into this world. Ninety percent of our bodies are water. Water covers  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the earth's surface. But water can destroy: floods, tidal waves, high tides and roaring seas capsizing boats and carrying raw sewage to once pristine beaches. Recall too the horrific damage from water in last fall's hurricanes in Florida and Haiti, now dwarfed by the catastrophe in Asia.

And into this reflection on water to cause and to take life, we can use our imaginations to reconstruct the moment of Jesus' baptism at the Jordan. Here's John (whose many followers must have been standing around) protesting that he should be the one receiving

baptism from Jesus. Baptism was a common ritual among certain groups at the time of John. The Essenes, a strict, ascetic community living in the Qumran area, had elaborate washing rituals of purification.

The casual bystander perhaps wouldn't have thought too much about this event of Jesus being baptized by John. After all, lots of people were hanging out at the Jordan getting baptized. But as the life of Jesus begins to unfold in the Scriptures, with the healings and the teachings, the choosing of his apostles, breaking bread with various groups, and finally his death and resurrection, this Jordan event takes on a whole different meaning. Suddenly one might conclude, "Oh, now I know why Jesus was baptized!"

Everything in Jesus' life bears witness to his total solidarity with the human family, with all its foibles and treacheries and sins, all of its brokenness, tragedy, suffering and death. If Jesus is the Son of God, then he is telling us through his baptism that God is not just "up there, in the sky or heavens somewhere," but God is in total solidarity with human need in all of its forms. God is with us just as we are and where we are – down by the dirty, muddy Jordan, humbling himself in letting John dunk him in the waters with all those sinners.

Jesus comes into the water to tell us there is no village too remote, no river too foul, no place of

temptation so terrible that God is not already there, waiting to take us by the hand. "I have grasped you by the hand. I formed you and set you as a covenant of the people, and a light for the nations, to free captives from prison, to open the eyes of the blind," proclaims Isaiah chapter 42, our first reading.

Jesus plunges into the water to open our eyes – to show us that heaven has been torn apart for us. That God's love is present for us at the beginning of our journey, long before the ending is revealed. Jesus wades into the Jordan to open our hearts – to show us that the love we are given also sends us out – out into the desert, out into the crowds, in solidarity with the people of Southeast Asia and wherever need is great. This is a good thought to pursue, following on the Christmas message that the "Word became flesh."

Perhaps it is true that, to  
have Christianity, you need  
but bread, wine and a river.