Baptism of Our Lord 2021.

Baptism is a curious Sacrament … and it’s one that we Christians tend to claim as our own. But like all traditions, events, feast days, ceremonies and the like can be borrowed, absorbed, modified etc from other sources … usually other religions.

Most of us forget that prior to commencing his Ministry, Jesus spent considerable time with the Essene Community … the desert dwellers … becoming not unlike our own Indigenous folk … self-reliant, living with and in nature, spiritualising Himself. Our Aborigines had never heard of Christianity until John Flynn turned up … but that didn’t mean they didn’t have their own deeply spiritual ceremonies.

And most theologians tell us … Jesus spent several years in India, learning from the great Hindu mystics. And here’s an interesting one … where Baptism to us is a Christian ritual, one of the three greater Sacraments, in which we in an active sense accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour and so become a Christian, and then in a strange way, we seem to make a contract with God … I believe in you, I’ve said so … so you’ll save me … but in Hinduism … no such contract exists … for one is Hindu by birth.

Now think about the many times I’ve shown ways in which things are connected, not just within Christianity, but also borrowed or partially so from others. Christmas, no matter the day it really was … our forefathers selected the bottom of the solar cycle, the winter solstice … as the day on which he was born … because that from that day onwards, more and more light would be coming into the world … for the days were now getting longer. It was later moved from December 21 to December 25, so as to work in with a Pagan ritual.

And only last week, we celebrated the Sunday in the Octave of Epiphany, Epiphany itself being precisely twelve days after the Nativity. 12. It could have been any number … but it is twelve, and when we often conduct infant baptism. In Hinduism, the ceremony that parallels baptism is called Namkaran, and it’s an elaborate ceremony, conducted … yep … you got it … twelve days after birth. Twelve days after Our Lord’s Nativity … Epiphany. The coming of enlightenment into the person, into the world and the beginning of this new contract with Our Lord.

So what is the meaning of Baptism to us as Christians, cos there’s so many types of us. Some won’t do infant baptism at all, arguing that the child cannot make decisions for itself … which is why we have godparents, whose role it is to ensure the child is brought up in the knowledge and love of Christ Jesus.

Some denominations do baptism as a way of washing away original sin, that horrendous Augustinian concept, arguably the worst legacy ever foisted on mankind. A wholly sinless child, just into the world … and some luny will yell and scream at it … you’re a sinner. And then there’s the aspect where we see it like an initiation into the faith tradition.

So what is the word itself ? What does it mean ? The word comes from the Greek, and was practised by the Jews as recorded in the Old Testament, and it refers to the idea of starting anew, or dying to the old world, so that a change of mindset, a rebirth can happen. For this reason, baptism has also always been seen in the context of repentance … as we read in Matthew’s Gospel.

We all know the story of his Baptism … first of John the Baptist coming among us, and then baptising our Lord … who wisely took his turn in the river along with many others.

And this shows the great humanity and humility of Jesus. Moreover, it shows us that He was baptised, not because he was a sinful person, but because he was demonstrating to us the need for each of us to engage directly with God the Father, and as He did so, the Father responded … “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased”. As we make the changes we need to, He is pleased with us too.

We in the Sacramental side of Christianity tend to focus on the Christ aspect … the eternal cosmic spirit and we certainly do so in Liberal Catholicism … but in doing so, we sometimes overlook or forget that Jesus was at one and the same time … God … and man. God … in human form.

So we need to appreciate that in engaging directly with God the Father, as Jesus did, we join with His Son in the death of the Christ … for baptism is not just about making a change in one’s direction or moral compass … it’s about engaging directly with Jesus the Christ in His journey … his life, his death, and … and … his resurrection.

And that’s why it was that John asked … are you sure ? And equally so, right that Jesus declined the offer to take the lead role.

Is it all coming together now ? The life of Christ, as witnessed by the many feast days and liturgical events reflect not just what happened 2100 years ago. Rather, they reflect also what is still happening right now.

Children are being born, they are having their own epiphany somewhere along their journey, then as needed, they reset their moral compass, and maybe actually have living water poured over them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

And I think we can leave it there.