

**Reflection on the Gospel-Baptism of Jesus Year A
(Matthew 3:13-17)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

According to the Church calendar, today's celebration of the Baptism of Jesus marks the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Ordinary Time. In many cultures, this feast coincides with the end of the Christmas break, the return to work and to the regular patterns of life. Some of us have been fortunate enough to get some "down time" since Christmas, precious time to reflect on the past year, alone or with loved ones, to set goals for the year ahead and to move into Ordinary Time with renewed life and vigour. For those affected by the prolonged and increasingly devastating bush fires in this land and on the west coast of the United States, Ordinary Time this year will be anything but ordinary. Their struggle to rebuild their lives and their homes invites us in the first place to open our hearts and to share our resources. It invites us to open our eyes to the changes we can expect as our planet warms. It also alerts us to our particular personal and collective responsibility to change the way we live so that life on this planet might actually have a future.

The baptism story is an initiation or commissioning story. We hear it against the backdrop of the first reading from Isaiah 42. Jesus is God's chosen one on whom God's Spirit rests. The voice of God commissions God's chosen to bring forth justice, sensitively and without fanfare: to be a light to the peoples; to open the eyes of the blind and to set the captives free. A Spirit-filled life consists in fulfilling such a mission.

In Matthew's account of the baptism, "the heavens are opened" and Jesus sees God's Spirit descending on him "like a dove". While the image of the heavens opening presents an ancient three-tiered understanding of the structure of the cosmos, we might nonetheless appreciate the sense it evokes of the all-encompassing cosmic nature of this commissioning event. God's words are addressed to all who listen to the gospel: "This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus' mission is to be understood in terms of "righteousness" or right relationship. Jesus' insistence that John baptise him despite John's reluctance points to the reversal of values that will characterise his mission. There is no pursuit of status or personal aggrandizement in a gospel way of life. Right relationship lies rather in respecting as God's creation the entire Earth community, in bringing forth justice and setting the captives free. Each one of us can make a difference to the "ordinary time" of those with whom we share life on this planet. The image of "the heavens" opening might serve as a reminder of the destructive effects of human-introduced space debris and of our responsibility to promote global legislation that might inhibit further devastation of this kind.