The baptism of Jesus marked a significant turning point in his life. It took place wen he was about thirty years of age. Up to then he had lived in relative seclusion, probably as a carpenter, in the home of his parents in a small town in Galilee.

His baptism is presented in the Gospels as marking the beginning of his pubic life of a religious preacher and teacher. Before long he began to attract attention and followers as well as opposition.

In Luke’s account of the baptism, which we just heard, he emphasizes less the ritual immersion in water and more the event that immediately followed upon it. The heaven was opened, he tells us, and the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and a voice came from heaven declaring, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

In the Bible, the phrase “the Son of God is open to a variety of meanings -from the Messiah to someone entrusted by God with a particular mission, and beyond both to the eternal Son or Word of God who took on a human life in Jesus. The words spoken over Jesus at his baptism suggest that he is being anointed by the Spirit in order to carry out a special mission entrusted to him by God, a mission that will embrace not only his life but also his death and resurrection.

Today’s reading from Isaiah marks the beginning of a section of his book addressed to those Israelites who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple and who subsequently were driven into exile in Babylon. Their exile, God declares through the prophet, will soon end. “Comfort, O comfort my people,” God urges the heavenly court and through them the prophet, “speak tenderly to Jerusalem and say to her that she has served her term.” The time of exile and of apparent abandonment by God will soon be over.

In language which will be applied in the New Testament to John the Baptist, the ancient prophet is instructed by God “to prepare the way of the Lord, to make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” The return of the people to their homeland will be like a new Exodus. God will be with them and will guide and protect them as they return across the wilderness to Jerusalem. “He will feed his flock like a shepherd;” the prophet tells us, “he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep.”

The reading marks the beginning of what is known as the book of Consolation. It is not difficult to understand how these thoughts and images, originally addressed to the prophet of the exile came to be applied to the life and mission of John the Baptist and of Jesus. As the true servant of God, Jesus comes to bring to all who accept him and his message forgiveness, reconciliation, and a new and more positive relationship with God. John will go before him to prepare his way.

Today’s reading from the letter of Paul to Titus evokes the salvation that is ours through Christ and points to baptism as the means by which we are enabled to share in the salvation that Christ won for us. “When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared,” Paul says, “he saved us … through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,” that it, through baptism.

From the very beginning of Christianity, faith and baptism were understood to constitute together the means by which we are brought into a living relationship with Jesus and with the power for forgiveness and life of his death and resurrection. In a passage in the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks of being born from above, born through water and the Spirit. Water suggests cleansing and new life. What enables the ritual to do what it symbolizes is the presence in it and in our midst of the Holy Spirit. “The Spirit,” Paul declares, “has been richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our Saviour.”

In his letter to the Romans, Paul draws an analogy between the baptismal ritual and the death and resurrection of Jesus. At that time, baptism was ordinarily of adults and involved a descending into and a rising up out of a large pool or stream of water. Paul saw in the ritual a descending into the tomb with Christ and a coming up out of it with him to newness of life.

The baptism of Jesus was not an end but a beginning. His commitment was tested not only by the tempter in the famous temptation scene that immediately follows but also by the opposition he met from many of the religious leaders of the time as well as by the inability of his disciples to understand him and above all to remain faithful to him in the face of his trial, condemnation and death.

For us, as for Jesus, baptism marks the beginning of a new life, a life in Christ, a life animated by his Spirit. If life in Christ is above all a gift of God, it also requires a conscious acceptance of it by us. At the heart of Christian life is an ongoing and deepening commitment to Christ and to the way of life to which he calls us.

Perhaps the simplest way to describe the challenge that is ours as people of faith is to become more truly who and what we already are through baptism.