

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord - B

Introduction

The feast of the Baptism of Our Lord begins a period of time in the liturgical calendar which is called Ordinary Time. During the period of Ordinary Time we are guided through the gospel readings in a chronological manner from the beginning of Jesus' public ministry through His entry into Jerusalem for His passion, death, and resurrection; an event for which we interrupt the cycle of Ordinary time to celebrate during the Easter season. During Cycle B our gospel readings concentrate on the Gospel of Mark (augmented with selections from the Gospel of John because Mark is so short). Cycle A concentrates on the Gospel of Matthew and Cycle C concentrates on Luke.

Cycle A Readings may also be used.

1st Reading - Isaiah 55:1-11

The book of Isaiah is not the kind of book which was written all at one time; different parts of it were written at different times over the 50-odd years of Isaiah's ministry. When the different parts were brought together to form the one book as we know it today is unknown, but we do know from historical evidence that it was in its present form at least as early the 3rd century B.C.

As far as authorship is concerned, Jewish-Christian tradition has always recognized Isaiah as the human author of the entire book. Some modern critics have divided Isaiah into three sections and attempted to ascribe authorship of each section to a different, and later, author. This theory is based on historical and sociological arguments – on the fact that the book refers to events which occurred after Isaiah's lifetime, which in effect means questioning his prophetic abilities.

After the Psalms, Isaiah is the Old Testament book which is most quoted in the New Testament: 22 quotations and 13 references, and all referring to Isaiah by name.

The section of Isaiah from which our reading for today comes is the

beginning of the conclusion to what has been called the Book of Consolation.

55:1 All you who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat; Come, without paying and without cost, drink wine and milk! ² Why spend your money for what is not bread; your wages for what fails to satisfy? Heed me, and you shall eat well, you shall delight in rich fare.

The Bible often uses the symbol of a banquet to describe God's love. The Passover out of Egypt is celebrated with a family banquet (Exodus 12) as well as the Sinai covenant (Exodus 24:5, 11). The abundance of heaven in the end times is often described as a heavenly banquet (Isaiah 25:6; 65:11-15; Psalm 22:5). All are invited to this eschatological banquet described here, all that is needed is a thirst for God and obedience to His call (Heed me and you shall eat well).

³ Come to me heedfully, listen, that you may have life.

We must listen because the source of life is to be found in God's word.

I will renew with you the everlasting covenant, the benefits assured to David.

God assures Israel that she will receive all the benefits of the everlasting covenant made with David long ago. Everlasting doesn't mean a covenant beginning now and lasting forever, but one which brings the promises of the distant past to present fulfillment. David had conquered nations but his successors could not maintain his kingdom. All the Davidic hopes are now secured as all nations beholding God's redemptive power within Israel hurry to join her ranks.

⁴ As I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of nations, ⁵ So shall you summon a nation you knew not, and nations that knew you not shall run to you, Because of the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, who has glorified you. ⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found, call him while he is near.

Israel must turn to God with urgent prayer and desperate need. Man must seek God, and yet God's ways are far beyond comprehension. This reading

combines the mysterious opposites of divine grace: God is transcendent, yet near enough to help; man is helpless, yet required to act energetically; the ways of God are exalted yet required of man (Hosea 14:10; Job 42:1-6; Sirach 43:28-35; Acts 13:10).

⁷ Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked man his thoughts; Let him turn to the LORD for mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving. ⁸ For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. ⁹ As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts. ¹⁰ For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down And do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, Giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, ¹¹ So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it.

The Word comes from God, but it can be heard only when it is soaked up in human life and spoken with human accents. Once heard, the Word becomes efficacious.

2nd Reading - 1 John 5:1-9

The essence of the 1st letter of John is that of the love of God and the love of the brethren which is the hallmark of the Christian. For “If anyone says ‘I love God’, and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that he who loves God should love his brother also” (1 John 4:20-21). As we see in many places, the commandment of fraternal love is an old commandment: God always wanted us to love others and he made this a basic commandment for the people of the Old Covenant (Leviticus 19:18). It is also a “new” commandment because it finds its fullest meaning in Christ’s life and teaching. Saint Jerome tells us that when John was a very old man his only message was “little children, love one another.” When his disciples asked him why he was always saying the same thing he always replied, “My children, this is what the Lord commands; if we do this, nothing else is necessary.” Our reading for today is a reaffirmation of love in action.

^{5:1} Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God, and

everyone who loves the father loves (also) the one begotten by him. ² In this way we know that we love the children of God when we love God and obey his commandments.

If the proof of the love of God consists in the love of one's brethren (1 John 4:20), it is no less true that the love of God that consists in obedience to his commandments is a sign that one loves his brothers, because this is the greatest and most inclusive of all the commandments. If we are part of God's family, and therefore called "children," then our love cannot exist apart from true Christian faith which loves Jesus as our eldest brother and other Christians as our brothers and sisters. If we love the one who begets, then we must also love the begotten.

³ For the love of God is this, that we keep his commandments.

The sign of love is obedience to the commandments (see John 14:15, 21).

And his commandments are not burdensome, ⁴ for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world.

The Christian possesses the power to overcome all hostile forces which would prevent his obedience to God's commandments.

And the victory that conquers the world is our faith.

The acceptance of Jesus in His true character is the source of the Christian's power.

⁵ Who (indeed) is the victor over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? ⁶ This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood.

Jesus was proclaimed "Son of God" at the beginning of His public ministry in the baptism of John (Mark 1:11), and He accomplished His mission by His bloody sacrifice on the cross.

The Spirit is the one that testifies, and the Spirit is truth.

The spirit was present at Jesus' baptism (Mark 1:10; John 1:32-34) and

continues to witness to the work achieved through Christ by His presence in the Church.

⁷ So there are three that testify, ⁸ the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and the three are of one accord.

This is an allusion to the sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist, the continuing witness of water, blood and the Spirit in the Church.

⁹ If we accept human testimony, the testimony of God is surely greater. Now the testimony of God is this, that he has testified on behalf of his Son.

The unified testimony satisfies the legal requirements of Deuteronomy 17:6, even as Christ Himself cited the testimony of Himself and His Father (John 8:17).

Gospel - Mark 1:7-11

The fact of Jesus' baptism has been a christological and theological issue to be reckoned with almost since it happened. After all, why would Jesus, who was sinless, participate in a rite for sinners? Also, why would Jesus, the Messiah and clearly superior to John the Baptist, submit to the authority of John? Jesus identifies Himself with sinful humanity by undergoing John's purificatory rite. Saint Mark reports the matter quite frankly with no protestations of unworthiness on the part of John the Baptist, unlike Matthew's account (Matthew 3:14-15). It is Jesus who sees the heavens opened and to Him alone that the heavenly voice is addressed. It is as though Jesus is being called to fulfill His vocation as Son by being the well-beloved Son after the pattern of Isaac who was prepared to sacrifice his life to ensure the blessings of God for mankind (Genesis 22:2, 12,16).

⁷ And this is what he proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me.

It is possible that John is referring to Elijah, whom Malachi 4:5 (Malachi 3:23 in the New American and New Jerusalem translations) tells us will come to announce the coming of the day of the Lord, but the most likely interpretation is that he is referring to the coming of Jesus, the Messiah.

“Even though Elijah the Tishbite was taken up to heaven (2 Kings 2:11), he was not greater than John. Enoch too was assumed into heaven (Genesis 5:24) but he was not greater than John. Moses was the greatest of the lawgivers and all the prophets were admirable, but none greater than John. It is not I who would dare compare prophet with prophet, but their Master and ours who Himself declared ‘Among those born of a woman there is none greater than John (Luke 7:28). Not ‘born of a virgin,’ observe! But ‘born of a woman.’” [Saint Cyril of Jerusalem (ca. A.D. 350), *Catechetical Lectures* 3,6]

I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals.

The work of a slave

“John was setting forth the anticipatory and ancillary value of his own baptism, showing that it had no other purpose than to lead to repentance. He did not say he baptized with water of forgiveness, but of repentance. He pointed toward Christ’s baptism, full of inexpressible gifts. John seems to be saying ‘... I am not worthy to be ranked to much as among Christ’s servants, no, not even the lowest of his servants, nor to receive the least honored portion of his ministry.’ Therefore John did not simply say, ‘his sandals,’ he said ‘the thong of his sandals,’ the part counted the least of all.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 370), *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew* 11,5]

⁸ I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

Saint Basil (writing around A.D. 370) compares baptism under Mosaic Law with John’s baptism: “The baptism which was handed down through Moses recognized, first, a distinction among sins, for the grace of pardon was not accorded all transgressions. It also required various sacrifices, laid down precise rules for purification, and segregated for a time those who were in a state of impurity and defilement. It appointed the observance of days and seasons, and only then baptism was received as the seal of purification. The baptism of John was far more excellent: It recognized no distinction of sins, nor did it require a variety of sacrifices, nor did it appoint strict rules for purification or any observance of days or seasons. Indeed, with no delay at all, anyone who had confessed his sins, however numerous and grave, had access at once to the grace of God and His Christ.” (*Concerning Baptism*, 31.2).

In the baptism introduced by Jesus, God purifies with His truth all man's deeds and will refine for Himself the body of man, rooting out every spirit of iniquity from the midst of his flesh and cleansing it of all impurity with the Holy Spirit.

⁹ It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. ¹⁰ On coming up out of the water

This does not state that Jesus was immersed for his baptism. We can "come up out of the water" when we go wading at the beach and walk back up on the shore.

he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. ¹¹ And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark recounts the theophany at Jesus' baptism as an apocalyptic vision seen only by Jesus. By keeping this theophany as a vision seen only by Jesus, Mark keeps Jesus' true identity a secret known only to the reader; it was not shared with those who witnessed the baptism in the Jordan. Four elements of the vision bring out the theological meaning of the event:

- 1) The heavens being torn open is an allusion to Isaiah 64:1, part of a prayer that God may inaugurate the end times as a new exodus.
- 2) The Spirit coming down is an allusion to Isaiah 63:11, 14 where God's spirit is said to have come down upon the Israelites during the Exodus.
- 3) The dove was a symbol of Israel in Hosea 11:11; Psalm 68:13; 74:19; Song 1:15; 2:14; etc. Jesus is thus designated as the representative of God's new people according to the Spirit.
- 4) The voice coming out of heaven is an allusion to Isaiah 42:1; it attests that Jesus is the unique Son of God, the Servant of Yahweh, anointed with His prophetic Spirit.

"Those who receive the baptism of Christ need not seek the baptism of John. Those who received the baptism of John did indeed seek the baptism of Christ.

... No baptism was necessary for Christ, but He freely received the baptism of a servant (John) to draw us toward His baptism.” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (A.D. 416), *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 5.5.3,4]

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