

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time - A

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

1st Reading - Isaiah 49:3, 5-6

The Jerusalem Bible titles this reading “The 2nd Song of the Servant of Yahweh”. There are four servant songs in Isaiah (42:1-7; 49:1-7; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12). They describe poetically the person (or nation) that will bring people to an awareness of God’s power, justice, and love. The servant will do this by his whole way of living, but most of all by the way he will bear the suffering brought about by the evil acts of the people. In his suffering, he will justify the people so that they can be restored to God after their separation. The early Church looked back to these servant songs of the Old Testament and began to see how clearly they defined the life and death of Jesus. This second Song of the Suffering Servant deals more with the “call” of the servant. He was called “from the womb.” The “light” theme of Epiphany is picked up in the last line of this reading.

³ The LORD said to me: You are my servant, Israel, through whom I show my glory.

This explicit mention of Israel creates a difficulty for those who interpret the Servant as an individual. Here he is referred to as the collective group of Israel.

⁵ For now the LORD has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, That Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him;

This use of Israel creates a difficulty for those who interpret the servant as a nation. How can the servant nation have a mission to itself? A solution has been offered by some who propose that the Servant is the gathering of all Israelites, but especially of the saintly members who then have a mission to the sinful members.

And I am made glorious in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength! ⁶ It is too little, he says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob,

The twelve tribes of Israel were named after the sons of Jacob (Israel). It was these tribes who settled the Promised Land after the exodus from Egypt.

and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

The mission of the Servant is expanded from Israel to the ends of the earth. This is a fulfillment of the promise to Abram in Genesis 12:3: “*All the peoples of the earth will be blessed through you.*” It is also the fulfillment of the prophecy of Simeon when Jesus was brought to

the Temple for the presentation (Luke 2:31-32): *“You have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the gentiles and for Glory to your people Israel.”* This is also quoted by Paul and Barnabas when they met opposition in the synagogue of Antioch in Pisidia and turned to the Gentiles.

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

We now begin a study of the first part of 1st Corinthians; a study which will continue until Lent. During the period between Epiphany and Lent we study the first part of 1st Corinthians during Cycle A, the middle part of 1st Corinthians during Cycle B, and the last part of 1st Corinthians during Cycle C.

Corinth was one of the most important commercial cities in the Roman Empire. Occupying a strategic position on the isthmus which linked the Peloponnese Peninsula to continental Greece, it had two ports; one on the Aegean Sea and one on the Ionian Sea – it was virtually an obligatory stop on the route from Asia to Italy.

According to Homer, Corinth was founded in the 9th century B.C. and saw its heyday in the 6th and 5th centuries B.C. with its schools of rhetoric and philosophy (the tomb of Diogenes was one of its proudest monuments). In 146 B.C. it was razed by the Roman General Lucius Mummius Achaicus; 100 years later Julius Caesar founded a new Roman colony on the ruins of the old city, giving it a new prosperity which lasted for three centuries.

Corinth was the capital of Achaia (Achaia and Macedonia were the two provinces into which the Romans divided Greece). It was also the residence of the Roman Proconsul. In the 1st century A.D. it had a population of some 600,000, making it the largest city in Greece. Up to 2/3 of the population were slaves, the rest being mainly Roman families. Since it was a key trading center, it had a cosmopolitan population – including people from Asia Minor, Phoenicians, Egyptians and others. And it had a Jewish community of some size, as can be seen from the fact that there was a synagogue in the city (Acts 18:4).

It was also a city with many different religions and with temples dedicated to all sorts of gods – and it was notorious for its low level of morality. Life “Corinthian style” was synonymous with depravity. Its aberrations included the cult of Aphrodite, which had 1,000 “priestesses” who practiced what was euphemistically called “sacred prostitution.” Saint Paul preached the Christian message in this city, and God’s help enabled him to found a flourishing Christian community.

¹ Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,

Paul is an authentic apostle, like the twelve, by virtue of his divine call.

“From the very beginning Paul casts down the Corinthians’ pride, in that he speaks of himself as

‘called.’ ‘For what I have learned,’ says Paul, ‘I did not discover myself, but it was while I was persecuting the Church that I was called. It was God who willed that you too should be saved in this way.’ We have done nothing good by ourselves, but by God’s will we have been saved. We were called because it seemed good to Him, not because we were worthy.” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 1,1]

and Sosthenes our brother,

Sosthenes is a Christian well known to the Corinthians. Probably not the Sosthenes of Acts 18:17, since nothing suggests his conversion. The name was quite common

² to the church of God that is in Corinth,

Paul uses the Greek word *ekklesia* (assembly) to designate a local church, denoting unity. The Septuagint used *ekklesia* to translate the Hebrew *qahal*, a term applied to the assembly of Israelites, particularly in their desert wanderings (Deuteronomy 23:2). As part of the *ekklesia* the Christian community is beginning to transcend local barriers.

to you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus,

Incorporated by baptism into the Body of Christ.

called to be holy,

Christians are holy, just as Israel was a holy nation by divine election (Exodus 19:6; 1 Peter 2:9).

with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.

The Corinthians are not the only Christians but are members of a much larger body.

“The Church ought to be unified because it belongs to God. It does not exist only in Corinth, but all over the world, and it is one, for the Church’s name (*ekklesia*) means ‘assembly.’ It is not a name of separation, but a name of unity and concord. [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 1,1]

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is Paul’s customary salutation that signifies the gracious goodness of God and the gifts that He gives to men whom He saves in Christ. We now have forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God.

“If our peace comes from God’s grace, why are you so proud, since you are saved by grace? How can anyone find grace with God, except through humility?” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 1,3]

Gospel - John 1:29-34

Each year the Gospel reading for the 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time is from the gospel of John. Why, I don't know.

In our reading today, Jesus is recognized by John the Baptist. The time is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. John the Baptist is baptizing in the Jordan River.

²⁹ The next day he (John the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

Since John's gospel doesn't stress atonement for sin as the primary purpose of Jesus' crucifixion and/or exaltation, John the Baptist's affirmation probably reflects the Servant of the Lord of Isaiah 53:7-12 where the Servant is compared to a lamb and is said to bear the iniquity of many (read [Isaiah 53:7-12](#)). This was the interpretation of the Greek Church Fathers. The Latin Fathers interpreted it as a reference to the Passover lamb – I find this a possible second level interpretation but the suffering servant of Isaiah is primary. The Passover lamb protected the people from destruction but did not take away sin.

³⁰ He is the one of whom I said, 'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.'

This is an affirmation of the pre-existence of Jesus. Was John the Baptist aware of the great truth when he said this? Probably not. In verse 21 he denied that he was the new Elijah who, according to Malachi 4:5 (3:23 in NJB and NAB) was to announce the coming of the Messiah. It may be that at this time John the Baptist thought of Jesus as the new Elijah. Jesus affirms John as the new Elijah in Matthew 11:13-15.

³¹ I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel."

The Baptist had not known that Jesus was the Messiah, even though the express purpose of his baptizing had been to prepare men for the Messiah's coming.

³² John testified further, saying, "I saw the Spirit come down like a dove from the sky and remain upon him.

John the Baptist recognized the Messiah only when he baptized him. (John presupposes you know the synoptic baptism story because he doesn't recount it, but refers to it). The theophany (appearance of God to man) at the baptism was an objective event and not merely a private experience of Jesus. John the Baptist did not have the Christian revelation of the Holy Spirit as a distinct person in the Godhead – he understood the Spirit in the Old Testament sense, as signifying God's vital power.

³³ I did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'On whomever

you see the Spirit come down and remain, he is the one who will baptize with the holy Spirit.'

The recognition of the Messiah by John the Baptist was of divine origin. The Old Testament prophets had foretold an outpouring of the Spirit in the Messianic age [Joel 2:28f (3:1f in NAB and NJB), Isaiah 32:15; Ezekiel 39:29; Zechariah 12:10].

³⁴ Now I have seen and testified that he is the Son of God."

Baptism by John the Baptist equals the Old Testament expectation. The Baptism of Jesus equals the New Testament fulfillment in the Holy Spirit. Possibly an allusion to Isaiah 42:1, recognizing Jesus as the Servant of the Lord.

St. Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Picayune, MS
<http://www.scborromeo.org>