

## Feast of the Baptism of the Lord – Cycle 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.

### 1<sup>st</sup> Reading -Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Our first reading this time is the first suffering servant song of Isaiah. The suffering servant represents the finest qualities of Israel and her great leaders. In this first song, he is a “chosen one” like Moses (Psalm 106:23), David (Psalm 89:4), and all Israel (1 Chronicles 16:13; Isaiah 41:8); as the Servant, he fulfills the role of Davidic king (2 Samuel 3:18), Messianic king (Ezekiel 34:23-24), and prophet (Amos 3:3). His kingly prerogative is especially emphasized here. Not only is he set in contrast to the military tactics of Cyrus (29<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A), but he is commissioned to “bring forth justice”, a legal decision ratifying and executing the divine will. The Bible, except in rare cases (Judges 4:5; 1 Samuel 7:6; 3:20) reserved that power to kings, priests, and local magistrates. The servant however has another quality: he imparts teaching (Torah), a task never done by kings but only by prophets (Isaiah 8:16; Zechariah 7:12) and priests (Jeremiah 2:8; Ezekiel 7:26).

**Thus says the LORD:<sup>1</sup> Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, Upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations,**

God is speaking, perhaps to the heavenly court. His words include not only the nation of Israel, but all nations. Notice that God had said of his servant “with whom I am pleased” – this harkens to Jesus’ baptism which we celebrate with this feast, and the transfiguration. God created the whole world and desires to save all of it.

**<sup>2</sup> Not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. <sup>3</sup> A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench,**

The servant accomplishes his mission modestly and quietly, not whipping people into conformity but transforming them interiorly. He has a gentle respect for others. It is interesting that the New American Bible omits the last part of verse 3 and the first part of verse 4 “he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed.”

**<sup>4</sup> Until he establishes justice on the earth; the coastlands will wait for his teaching.**

The apostate Israelites spread throughout the Babylonian empire, to the far edges of the known world, and thus lost in the crowd are being called to conversion.

**<sup>6</sup> I, the LORD, have called you for the victory of justice,**

“Victory of justice” is one word in Hebrew. This single word might be better translated “conformable to my plan of salvation.”

**I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you,**

This evokes images of the creation of the first man (Genesis 2:7). The term is also used for a potter who is carefully molding his clay (Isaiah 45:9; 64:8; Jeremiah 18:6; Romans 9:21).

**and set you as a covenant of the people,**

If they have a covenant relationship with God, they are part of God’s family. Israel is the firstborn of the nations and as the eldest brother it is to set the example and guide the others.

**a light for the nations,**

Lead them from darkness.

**<sup>7</sup> To open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.**

People must recognize their blindness and imprisonment before they can be cured and freed.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Reading - Acts 10:34-38**

Our second reading takes place at the home of Cornelius, the Roman centurion. Cornelius was a proselyte of the type who, attracted by Judaism’s monotheistic beliefs and strict code of ethics, attended synagogue services and observed the 10 commandments but did not become full members of the Jewish community by circumcision and observance of the dietary restrictions. Cornelius was visited by an angel while he was at prayer and directed to summon Peter from Joppa. When Peter arrived and heard of the vision of Cornelius he instructed him in the story of the life, death, and messiahship of Jesus. At the end of the instruction the Holy Spirit fell upon Cornelius and all his household and conferred upon them the gift of tongues. Peter found this sufficient justification to baptize them, although they were Gentiles – the first Gentile converts. Today we hear some of Peter’s instruction to them prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit.

**<sup>34</sup> Then Peter proceeded to speak and said, “In truth, I see that God shows no partiality.**

Literally, “God is not one showing favors” this is an allusion to Deuteronomy 10:17. God has

no favorites and doesn't accept bribes. Salvation is available to all.

**35 Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.**

What is translated as "uprightly" is literally, "practices righteousness." This can be done even if one is not a Jew.

**36 You know the word**

Refers to Jesus the Christ who is Lord of all (John 1:1).

**(that) he sent to the Israelites as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all,**

The proclamation (that Jesus is Lord of all) was first made to the Jews (the sons of Israel) will be made to the Gentiles (see Psalm 107:20). The "proclaimed peace" could be an allusion to Isaiah 52:7 (Christmas During the Day) which describes the function of the herald of the good news that was to be made to Jerusalem.

**37 what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached,**

The baptism of John was a baptism of repentance – being reunited to God through acknowledgment of and sorrow for sins.

**38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth**

Jesus was a Nazarene and this was a play on Isaiah 11:1 "a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a branch will bear fruit." Nazareth means "branch-town". The mention of anointing is an allusion to Isaiah 61:1 (3rd Sunday of Advent Cycle B). It also recalls Jesus' investiture with the "power" of the Spirit at His baptism (Luke 3:22; 4:14,18). This does not mean that Jesus became the messiah at his baptism – this was a sign to the others. Jesus is the spirit-filled agent of God's saving activity.

**with the holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.**

### **Gospel - Matthew 3:13-17**

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? In his gospel, Matthew addresses these issues.

**13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.**

Jesus spent about thirty years (Luke 3:23) in what is usually called his “hidden life”, the period of time from His birth until the beginning of His public ministry. Except for the incident of the finding in the Temple when He was 12, we know nothing about His childhood. There may be many reasons why He waited so long before beginning His public ministry, but one factor may have been the Jewish custom whereby rabbis did not carry out their function as teachers until they were 30 years old. John the Baptist prepares the people to receive the Messiah according to God’s plan; it is only then that Jesus commences His public life.

**14 John tried to prevent him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?”**

John’s reluctance to baptize Jesus is not surprising. After all, he has given forthright witness to Him. Jesus did not need to be Baptized by John since He had no sin, but He chose to receive this baptism before beginning to preach, so as to teach us all to obey all of God’s commands (He had already subjected Himself to circumcision, presentation in the temple and being redeemed as the firstborn).

**15 Jesus said to him in reply, “Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he allowed him.**

Jesus shows us by example the humility necessary as we submit to the authority of others. Righteousness (justice) has a very deep meaning in Scripture; it refers to the plan which God, in His infinite wisdom and goodness, has marked out for man’s salvation. Jesus comes to receive the baptism of John because He recognizes it as a stage in salvation history which has been planned by God as preparation for the Messianic era. Jesus, who has come to fulfill His Father’s will (John 4:34), is careful to fulfill that saving plan in all its aspects.

**16 After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water**

This has been interpreted by some of our separated brethren to mean that Jesus was fully immersed during His baptism. But in fact, 2<sup>nd</sup> century frescoes depicting Jesus’ baptism by John show Him standing in ankle deep water and having the water poured over His head. One can “come up from” the water when wading at the beach, without ever having been immersed.

**and behold, the heavens were opened (for him), and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove (and) coming upon him.**

This theophany was for the benefit of the observers. Jesus possessed the fullness of the Holy Spirit from the moment of His conception. Catholic teaching says that in Christ there is only one person (who is divine) but two natures which are divine and human. This teaching is called the dogma of the hypostatic union. The descent of the Holy Spirit signifies the beginning of the work of the Holy Spirit through Jesus as He begins His public ministry.

Besides signifying the Spirit, the dove is also seen as a figure for Israel as God's chosen people in Song of Songs (1:15; 2:14; 4:1; 5:2; 6:9). In this way, we can see the presence of the dove at Jesus' baptism as a symbol of the New Israel, the new people of God for whom Jesus' saving ministry will be exercised.

**17 And a voice came from the heavens, saying, "This is my beloved Son, \* with whom I am well pleased."**

This harkens back to our first reading (Isaiah 42:1). As if to affirm Jesus' identity and His mission, the voice from heaven speaks. Literally, it is the *bat gol* (daughter of a voice) which is frequently mentioned in rabbinic literature as the means of revelation granted after all prophecy had ceased.

The mystery of the Holy Trinity is revealed in the baptism of Jesus: the Son is baptized; the Holy Spirit descends on Him in the form of a dove; and the voice of the Father gives testimony about His Son. Christians must be baptized in the name of the three divine persons (Matthew 28:19). Then, as St. Cyril of Jerusalem (died c. 386) writes "If you have sincere piety, the Holy Spirit will descend on you also and you will hear the voice of the Father saying to you from above: "This was not my son, but now after Baptism he has been made my son."