

Feast of the Baptism of the Lord – Cycle C

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.

Introduction

The feast of the Baptism of The 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 40:1-5, 9-11

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.

Our reading for today opens with five of the seven verses of the second suffering servant song of Isaiah. The suffering servant songs portray the ideal Servant of God, the perfect Israelite, whose consecration to the divine will, even in the midst of overwhelming suffering "takes away the sins of many" (Isaiah 53:12). This second suffering servant song is addressed to the Gentile nations and presents the servant as another Jeremiah: he is called from his mother's womb (Jeremiah 1:5); has a vocation to the Gentiles (Jeremiah 1:10; 25:1); brings a message of both doom and happiness (Jeremiah 16:19-21), of both suffering and purification (Jeremiah 11:18-12:6); and he reacts at times with heavy discouragement (Jeremiah 14:17; 20:7). Our reading today then closes with a proclamation of the wondrous reversal of Israel's fortune. Pre-Christian Judaism gave a messianic

interpretation to the suffering servant songs, but it was Jesus Himself who clearly identified Himself as the Servant.

49:1 Hear me, O coastlands, listen, O distant peoples. The LORD called me from birth, from my mother's womb he gave me my name.

God sets His chosen ones on the way to their vocation even before their birth: Jeremiah (Jeremiah 1:5), John the Baptist (Luke 1:15), Jesus (Luke 1:31), and Saint Paul (Galatians 1:15).

2 He made of me a sharp-edged sword and concealed me in the shadow of his arm. He made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me. 3 You are my servant, he said to me, Israel, through whom I show my glory.

The explicit mention of "Israel" appears to refer to the collective gathering of all Israelites, especially the saintly members of the people who are to minister to the others. We have a similar condition today in the "body of Christ," His Church.

4 Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength, Yet my reward is with the LORD, my recompense is with my God.

The servant expresses his discouragement over what seems to him to be a wasted ministry.

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; And I am made glorious in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength! 9 Saying to the prisoners: Come out! To those in darkness: Show yourselves! Along the ways they shall find pasture, on every bare height shall their pastures be. 10 They shall not hunger or thirst, nor shall the scorching wind or the sun strike them; For he who pities them leads them and guides them beside springs of water. 11 I will cut a road through all my mountains, and make my highways level.

In response to the discouragement expressed, God is depicted as a shepherd leading His sheep along a new exodus.

2nd Reading - Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

Titus was the bishop ordained by Saint Paul on the island of Crete. This letter, believed to have been written around the year 65 while Saint Paul was in Macedonia, expresses worry about the damage being done by false teachers; teachers who have "a morbid disposition for arguments and verbal disputes" (1 Timothy 6:4). It is generally believed that these false teachers were Judaizing Christians who were using verses of the Old Testament (the only Scriptures possessed by the early Church) out of context to lead people astray. In response to this, Saint Paul reminds Titus of the need for "sound doctrine" and for the necessity of guarding the deposit of faith, the "truth which has been entrusted to you" (the oral Tradition of the New Testament, none of which has been canonized as

yet).

2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, saving all

The incarnation and redemptive work of Christ is for all mankind.

12 and training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age, 13 as we await the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of the great God and of our savior Jesus Christ,

This phrase might be better translated as “great God and Savior Jesus Christ.” It is an eloquent expression of Saint Paul’s belief in the divinity of Christ. It is not intended to refer to God (the Father) and Jesus separately.

“And Paul said: ‘from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all things, God blessed forever, Amen’ (Romans 9:5). And again: ‘No fornicator or covetous one has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God’ (Ephesians 5:5). And still again: ‘through the appearance of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.’ And John calls him by the same name of God when he says: ‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God; and the Word was God’ (John 1:1).” [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 386), *Homilies Against the Anomoians and on The Incomprehensible Nature of God* 5,2]

14 who gave himself for us to deliver us from all lawlessness and to cleanse for himself a people as his own, eager to do what is good.

This is a direct reference to Jesus’ sacrifice on the altar of the cross; the sacrifice which instituted the New Covenant in which we are made children of God with a heavenly inheritance.

3:4 But when the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared, 5 not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of his mercy, he saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the holy Spirit, 6 whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior, 7 so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life.

These closing verses describe the change wrought by Christ. The “bath of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit” is a reference to the sacrament of baptism and the effect of receiving that sacrament – we are “born again of water and Spirit” (John 3:3, 5) as a new creation, regenerated without sin, adopted members of God’s household (Romans 8:15-17).

“Strange, isn’t it, how we were so drowned in wickedness that we could not be purified? We needed a new birth! For this is implied by ‘regeneration.’ For as when a house is in a ruinous state no one places props under it nor makes any addition to the old building, but pulls it down to its foundations and rebuilds it anew. So in our case, God has not repaired us but made us anew.” [Saint John Chrysostom (ca. A.D. 385), *Homilies on Titus* 5]

Gospel - Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Saint Luke devotes only two verses to Jesus' baptism; and in doing so presents it as an accomplished fact. He spends more time describing the baptism which John the Baptist performed and who is baptized. John is featured as the last of the Old Testament prophets, the one who is to announce the coming of the messiah. Throughout his account, Saint Luke depicts John the Baptist as denying that he is the awaited messiah and as turning the attention of the people from himself to Jesus.

15 Now the people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Messiah.

The expectation was that the time had arrived for the messiah to come and redeem Israel. This event was awaited expectantly.

16 John answered them all, saying, "I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming.

The expected messiah is the great liberator in the war against Satan. The word "mighty" is often used in Scripture for the leader of the final struggle with evil (Mark 2:15; Matthew 11:19; Luke 7:34).

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

The work of a slave

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

John announces Christian baptism, proclaiming that he is not the Messiah; he, who is on his way, will come with the authority of supreme Judge that belongs to God, and with the dignity of the Messiah, who has no human equal. In Scripture, fire often indicates the presence of the Savior-God. Fire has a prominent place in liturgical services where man meets his savior (Leviticus 1:7ff; 6:2,6). Great theophanies surround God with fire (Genesis 15:17; Exodus 3:1ff; Numbers 14:14; Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1:4ff; Joel 3:3). God comes "in fire" to judge, that is, to fulfill his promises to the elect and remove evil from their midst. With this rich Biblical background it is difficult to decide whether the Baptist's statement about Jesus identifies fire with the Spirit's purifying and sanctifying action or, or instead, adds a new dimension of eschatological judgment. I suspect the latter.

21 After all the people had been baptized

This concludes the Baptist's apostolate by showing the fulfillment of the mission confided to John before his birth "to prepare a perfect people for the Lord (Luke 1:17). Men have been led to their final moment of world salvation through the baptism administered by John; they are ready to become the messianic, eschatological people of God (Acts 15:14).

and Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, heaven was opened

The imagery of heavens opening frequently implies a vision of heavenly secrets in apocalyptic writing (Ezekiel 1:1). This intensifies the eschatological tone of the baptism, our first reading begs God, one last time, to repeat the great redemptive acts toward His people, especially the Exodus out of bondage. Jesus baptism, therefore, answers that prayer and envisages a whole community advancing to the new and most joyful promised land. Jesus' baptism, however, remains more of a promise to be fulfilled at Pentecost when the heavens will open again and the Spirit will descend upon the community (Acts 2).

22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him

The Messianic gift to be bestowed on the Church at Pentecost

in bodily form

The Holy Spirit was visible to all. These words are found only in Luke.

like a dove.

The oldest interpretation is that the dove represents the new people of Israel, the eschatological community. Hosea 11:11 and Psalm 68:14 depict Israel as a dove. What we have again is the eschatological aspect of the community and a prefigurement of Pentecost. In the flood narrative, the dove brought back the olive branch which symbolized new life. In the baptism of Jesus, the dove also symbolizes the bringing of a new life in Christ. The representation of the Holy Spirit as a dove is a later symbolism. Because the dove is in visible form, Jesus can almost reach out and touch the new community taking shape around Him. Pentecost will achieve the promise of Jesus' baptism. More recent interpretation is that in Christ's baptism we can find a reflection of the way the sacrament of Baptism affects a person. Christ's baptism was the exemplar of our own. In it the mystery of the Blessed Trinity was revealed, and the faithful, on receiving Baptism, are consecrated by the invocation of and by the power of the Blessed Trinity. The opening of heaven signifies that the power, the effectiveness, of this sacrament comes from above, from God, and that the baptized have the road to heaven opened up for them, a road which original sin had closed.

And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

The time has come for Him to teach, to work miracles and to draw men to Himself. It is only fitting for His Godhead to be attested to from on high by the Father's testimony, so that His teaching might be more credible: "The father who sent me has Himself borne witness to me" (John 5:37).