

ECHOING GOD'S WORD
in
THE CATHOLIC FAITH COMMUNITY
Baptism of the Lord
January 9, 2023

Lectionary Readings:

Isaiah 42:1-4,6-7

Acts 10:34-38

Matthew 3:13-17

God's servant will bring sight to the blind.

God has anointed Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah and Lord.

Jesus is the beloved Son of the Father.

Read the Scriptures:

Read the three Scripture passages given in the Lectionary for this weekend. Begin with the Gospel, since the other readings are always chosen in terms of the Gospel reading. (The Second Reading does not always have the same theme as the Gospel and the First Reading. The First Reading will be directly related to the Gospel in its content.) Repeat the Gospel reading. Remember that the word of God in the Bible is primarily addressed to the faith community and does not necessarily answer any questions which an individual might have. We simply ask, "What message does the Church (or this faith-sharing group or this family) need to hear?" We listen to the word with that question in mind.

Matthew:

Matthew gathers his material for Jesus' baptism from the straightforward way in which Mark presented it. But, he adds two details.

We know today that Mark wrote his Gospel first. By the time Matthew and Luke were ready to write theirs, the Christian community had gone through some major developments and were experiencing some issues which Jesus had not addressed. So, Matthew and Luke arrange the events and the words of Jesus to answer some of those concerns. Here, we will see Matthew add two things to Mark's account.

1. Jesus and John engage in this dialogue about who should be baptizing whom. Here, we see John objecting that Jesus comes to him for baptism. Should not Jesus be doing the baptizing? Isn't this a *baptism of repentance*? Jesus does not need to repent. Why, then, does he insist on baptism? Matthew had Jesus say that this baptism must take place so as to fulfill all *righteousness*. Jesus wants to identify with all human persons so that God's purposes for sending him will be fulfilled. He must be truly human if he is to stand with us for our redemption. And, secondly, Matthew wants his world to know that the followers of John the Baptist should not use this scene to claim that John was greater than Jesus. Jesus gives a reason for accepting this baptism without indicating any inferiority to John.

2. Also, we have the words addressed from heaven. In Mark, God speaks to Jesus only. In Matthew, all the people are there to hear what God has to say about Jesus. *My beloved son in whom I am well pleased* has to be heard by people from all ages now. The Jewish nation has to hear. Gentile converts also have to know this. It is time for all these people to know that God has placed his endorsement on Jesus who will fulfill all God's will. God uses the words from the Prophet Isaiah that this One is his Suffering Servant.

The Church places the baptism of Jesus right after the celebration of the Epiphany in order to emphasize that Jesus' mission and message is for the whole world to receive. All nations will be there for God's glory in Christ. Matthew had a group of people he needed to persuade. They came from many nations. It was important that they know that Jesus was approved!

Isaiah:

The Book of Isaiah contains four "Servant Songs." This is the first. (Others are: 49:1-6; 50:4-11; 52:13-53:12). The ideal Servant of the Lord is Israel. When Israel is led to be the Messiah, it will truly be the Servant. The Servant sums up all the desirable attributes of God's people. In this Song, the Servant is depicted as one who would represent a highly placed court official. His mission and courtly style are described: *With gentleness*, the Servant will bring justice. That is, he will bring the people into covenant relationship with God and with one another. Through him, the Covenant of old will be extended to all nations, particularly to the oppressed. The Christian community has read into this prophecy the name of Jesus, especially in baptism accounts. Notice that even without a Christian application, this passage already prophesies that Gentiles will be invited to become part of the Chosen.

Acts:

The Book of Acts often reconstructs certain sermons given by the apostles, particularly Peter and Paul. Here, we are given a sermon uttered by Peter at the baptism of Cornelius, the Gentile, and his family. The early Christian community struggled mightily to accept the practice that Gentiles would be welcomed at the table of the Eucharist. Would not the Jewish Christians be rendered unclean by such table fellowship with Gentiles? Peter declares that nothing is unclean if God makes it clean. Notice the allusion to the washing of the baptism. Even before Paul's ministry to the Gentiles, Peter was already practicing the inclusion of Gentiles in Christian baptism and communal fellowship. We need to pay attention to the sermons given by Peter and Paul in the Acts of the Apostles.

Questions for Discussion

1. Describe some celebrations of baptism that you have seen recently. Did you feel included in what was happening? Were you given a sense that baptism is a community-based celebration and that you are part of that community that does baptisms? If a person does not want to become responsible for the faith life of the child or adult being baptized, don't you think that one should walk out? How do you feel about that?
2. What do you think Matthew had in mind by including his Gospel message with the baptism of Jesus? Do you suppose he wanted to have the Holy Spirit testify right away as to who Jesus is? We begin our baptisms by tracing the Sign of the Cross over the person. Why? Why does that have to come first? Does the cross come first in your life? In what ways do you welcome that cross? In what ways do you avoid the cross?
3. If the Church is to follow Christ, does that mean that the Church will have to "go to the cross" also, as Jesus did? What does that mean? Do you see the Church trying to avoid the cross at times? Do you see the Church embracing the cross at other times? Can you suggest ways in which your parish community should be more closely identified with those who are suffering today? What kinds of suffering are being ignored by your parish today?

Suggestion for Christian Action

More parishes today have a good pre-baptism program. Ask your parish if you might help set up an effective after-baptism program for children and parents from the time immediately after baptism to the beginning of faith formation classes when a child goes to school.

Prayer

Lord, keep us, your children,
born of Water and the Spirit,
faithful to our calling.

Catholic Doctrine

Baptism introduces us into the fellowship of God's people, which is the Church, by shaping our inner selves into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Just as the Spirit hovered over the waters at Creation and brought forth life, so now, the same Spirit hovers over the waters of baptism and brings forth the life of Christ in us, a new creation.

The waters, the Spirit, and new life: These are the images in that scene of Creation in the Book of Genesis; these are the same images that shape our spiritual existence in the tradition of Christian baptism. We are not dealing with empty images here. We have the power of the Spirit of God at work in and through the signs that God has chosen.

The life of the Risen Christ is created in us by the power of the Holy Spirit in our baptism. The sacrament has a real effect. It is not just a sign of our personal faith. By baptism, we are made part of the body of Christ, which is the community of faith.

The primary symbol at work in baptism is the community itself. The Church is gathered by the Holy Spirit and consecrated into being a holy instrument or sacrament, to immerse others into the dying and rising of Christ, to proclaim eternal life. The fundamental sign present at every baptism is the Church itself, sign of the eternal kingdom gathered by the Spirit into Christ.

Baptism cannot be equated with magic: secret words said by a priest that will make a child holy! Baptism is much more than that. It is a sacred event through which we are initiated into a community, which is the body of Christ, the people of God, with a sacred destiny and a holy purpose.

What is the mission of the Christian in the world? Just to avoid sin and remain pure and uncontaminated by the world? Surely not! The Church knows that it has been called to be a light to the world in which it lives, a leaven in the dough, a salt that gives flavor to all things. With Isaiah, we believe that we too must do what the Servant was sent to do: to bring forth justice. Justice in the Bible means a relationship of harmony and peace with God and with one another. It is the result of grace, God's gift that restores the harmony first intended at creation. God's covenant is the model of justice. We surrender to God, accepting God's love and guidance; God becomes our God, directing all aspects of our lives. Our relationships with one another are molded by the same covenant model: given and dedicated to one another for the sake of the Lord. Reaching beyond the boundaries of our usual contacts, we will bring covenant relationships to others with love and peace. The Church exists to go beyond itself.

See: The Catechism: #1213-1245

