

Seton Hall University

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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals (January 11, 2009)

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Celebrant's Guide and Commentary and Reflections for Sundays and Festivals

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THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Sunday, January 11, 2009

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INTRODUCTION TO THE MASS

We rightly consider our Baptism to be the foundation for our calling or vocation as Christians, followers of Jesus as God the Father's Anointed One. This feast, however, celebrates the *mission* of Jesus and is an occasion for us to reflect upon our mission as adults in God's service.

INVITATION TO REPENTANCE

How have we accepted the gifts of God in Baptism? We may fail through action or omission, so we ask pardon for any ways in which we have neglected to use the virtues of faith and charity in our lives. To prepare the way of the Lord we acknowledge our sins.

Lord, we have sinned against you: Lord, have mercy.
Christ Jesus, show us the Father's mercy and grant us salvation.

HEADINGS FOR READINGS

First Reading (Isaiah 55:1-11). The gifts of God are priceless, especially those of the spiritual order. However, the prophet challenges his listeners, and us, to acknowledge that divine wisdom is often beyond our initial perception.

Second Reading (1 John 5:1-9). The Baptism of Jesus and the guidance of the Holy Spirit in his public ministry prepare the Church for an understanding of the sacraments flowing from Jesus' sacrifice.

Gospel (Mark 1:7-11). Jesus was impelled by John's baptism to take the task of Servant to a new level. Now his personal union with the heavenly Father will be expressed through obedient service, laying down his life for all.

OR

First Reading (Isaiah 42:1-7). The greatest exercise of human freedom is to serve God and to strive for justice and peace in his world. The prophets called the leaders of God's people to exemplify these ideals, so Isaiah depicts the ideal in hymns that the Gospels apply to Jesus.

Second Reading (Acts 10:34-38). Through a dream-vision Peter learned that the Gospel should be offered to all nations. Thus would the ministry of Jesus, made efficacious through the presence of the Holy Spirit, be extended without limit to all in need of healing.

PRAYER OF THE FAITHFUL

President: Through the sacrament of Baptism, Jesus has introduced us to his union with the heavenly Father. To imitate his mission of willing service, we ask for divine gifts.

Reader(s):

For Pope Benedict and all bishops: that they may serve in growing fidelity to the imperative of the Gospel.

For all the baptized: that they may seek to share God's blessings with all whom they meet in the course of their daily tasks.

For all in the legal profession: that they may exercise the application of laws to procure justice as a means to peace in society.

For those in parishes who prepare for Baptism; may they be guided to a deep love of Christ.

For all homemakers: may their acts of loving service in the family be blessed abundantly.

For all women who are pregnant: may they treasure the gift of life.

For all who have died: may their lives of service be rewarded eternally.

President: Merciful Lord, you sent your Son to bring forgiveness and right order to the world. May all the faithful be uplifted by your strength to imitate the pattern of service provided by Jesus, who now lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit.

INTRODUCTION TO THE LORD'S PRAYER

In union with Jesus, your beloved Son, we pray as he taught us:

INVITATION TO THE SIGN OF PEACE

The blessings of Baptism unite us with Christ and with each other. May the sign of peace manifest our faith which works through charity.

COMMUNION REFLECTION

Heavenly Father, your Son draws us to you through the sacraments. We are enriched by his presence as the Bread of Life to extend his service of teaching and healing into our time. May we see the ways that our pursuit of justice and love will foster your gift of peace.

FINAL BLESSING

May the one God draw all people into the fullness of life. May the Father's blessings come into our world through his Son in the Holy Spirit.

COMMENTARY

First Reading (Isaiah 55:1-11). Many prophets were teachers by admonition, trying to alert the leaders of Israel and Judea that persistence in wrong doing would bring judgment on the entire community. A later generation of prophets interpreted the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC and the

exile of survivors in Babylon to be the punishment for sins of idolatry and injustice. Like sages and psalmists these teachers offered a message of hope and a sense of mission for those in exile (Isa 55:5). But first, they must savor the marvelous abundance of God's gifts, presented as a banquet for the poor (see Isa 25:6-8).

In preparation for their mission the chosen people must seek the LORD (Isa 55:6); the wicked must undergo a conversion to God, who is merciful and gracious. The logic of human standards may be the basis for human interaction but God's ways are surprising and unsettling unless people become attuned to a higher set of values. For all who open themselves to divine mercy the word of God is efficacious and fruitful (Isa 55:10-11).

Response (Isaiah 12:2-6). The images of abundant water and precipitation in the reading receive a response of gratitude and joy.

Second Reading (1 John 5:1-9). The Church celebrates the Baptism of Jesus as the manifestation his union with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, opening humanity to faith in him as the Christ. This feast points to the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' death-and-resurrection, which is the foundation for the sacraments of the Church. Thus the ministry of loving service exercised by Jesus is extended generation after generation to the faithful. Their response is to love God in return for the mercy shown through Jesus and to imitate him in obeying the commandments.

Gospel (Mark 1:7-11). Before Jesus embarked upon his ministry of peacemaking, he accepted John's "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). Although he did not need a symbolic experience of confession and repentance for himself, Jesus wanted to manifest his solidarity with the common human condition. The divine plan was to repair the ravages of sin from *within* the human situation, enabling people to appreciate fully both the marvel of reconciliation and the peace that it brings. No one should despair about "preparing the way of the Lord", because Jesus has accomplished the central dimension of the healing and strengthening process. All that remains is the cooperation that manifests our desire to live as creatures formed in the divine image.

Mark describes the descent of the Holy Spirit and the Father's proclamation as experiences of Jesus himself. This implies that, in his baptism, the Lord came to know new aspects of his divine Sonship and mission. He would continue to advance in wisdom, age and grace before God and men (Luke 2:52). His baptism manifested his bond with the human race, called to the eternal destiny of being God's children. How would this be achieved? By response to God's will, now manifested with reference to the person of Jesus. Those disciples who were privileged to witness the Transfiguration heard the Father's voice: "This is my beloved Son. Listen to him" (Mark 9:7).

Describing the Baptism, Mark records the words in the second person: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (1:11). Already Jesus had manifested that pattern of obedience to the Father's will that would characterize his commitment until the moment he was "baptized" into death (Mark 10:38).

OR

First Reading (Isaiah 42:1-7). The Hebrew term may be translated as servant or slave. In ancient societies the word designated a human being who was not granted full personhood; the individual was the underpinning of an order that favored the few over the multitude. Yet, the leaders of Israel, kings and priests, were called "servants of the Lord" as a title of honor. Their great privilege was to bring the chosen people from servitude in idolatrous nations to service of the living God.

During the Babylonian Exile (586-539 B.C.) the followers of Isaiah the prophet explained that the remnant who survived the destruction of Jerusalem were to exercise a new mission. They remained the chosen people in spite of their woes and now they should recognize the call to be a light to the nations (Isa 60:1-3). In a series of hymns the preparation for this role is presented in the person of a mysterious servant of the Lord. He will receive God's Spirit to fulfill the mission of bringing justice to the nations (Isa 42:1). How? Not by military force but with the gentle message of a teacher who ignites the flicking light of goodness in each person and culture. People have a capacity to be open to divine grace as long as they follow their conscience. "In truth he brings forth justice..., until he establishes justice on the earth and the islands wait for his instruction (*tora*h)" (Isa 42:3-4).

Responsorial Psalm 29. Isaiah's first Servant Song (42:1-7) depicts God's call to service in the gentle exercise of authority. This ancient psalm describes the powerful voice of God resounding through the natural world. The faithful people respond to the divine majesty by acknowledging his presence. "Glory to God in the highest!"

Second Reading (Acts 10:34-38). The first reading shows that God's call for justice and peace is intended for all humanity. "Many people shall come and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD... that he may teach us his ways...'" (Isa 2:2-4). After his resurrection Jesus commissioned the Apostles to "go into all the world and proclaim the Good News" (Mark 16:15). Did God want all to accept the Jewish way of keeping the *Tora*h? During his siesta Peter received an answer with an example from the dietary laws: "What God has made clean you must not call common" (Acts 9:16). The pious centurion, Cornelius, was instructed by an angel to ask for Simon Peter because God's teaching should be experienced in a community of faith. After Peter presented the message of peace in the ministry of Jesus, the Lord of all, the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentile listeners. The gifts of God are offered without partiality to all who stand in awe and follow their consciences (see Hebrews 11:6).

REFLECTION

How often do we have - or foster - the occasion to speak with our neighbors about Jesus and his work? We may question the value of slogans on car bumpers and other such means of getting attention; certainly the quiet consistent witness of the Christian life is much more important. However, we should be prepared to share our faith with those who show interest. As in the early Church, our focus should be centered on the death-and-resurrection of Jesus: this testimony of his obedience to the Father and his loving union with sinful humanity constitutes the foundation for all that he did and taught.

This selection from the first letter of John links the coming of the Holy Spirit at the Baptism of Jesus with his passion and death. "When Jesus had received the vinegar, he said: 'It is consummated,' and he bowed his head and gave up the spirit" (John 19:30). Jesus is shown to be in control of his destiny and thus accomplished his Father's will. He gave up the spirit, perhaps pointing to the gift of the Spirit to the Church for the forgiveness of sins (John 20:22-23). The witness to the piercing of Jesus' side testified to the blood and water "so that you also may believe" (John 19:35). This faith in Jesus is the source of the victory of the baptized, those born of water and the Spirit, over "the world." The great contest between Jesus and those succumbing to evil, enslaved by the Prince of darkness, has ended; however, every generation experiences the struggle between God and the forces of evil, which can take many shapes and forms. Those who receive the Word, who believe in his Name, have become children of the heavenly Father. In imitation of Christ, they show loving gratitude for divine gifts by obeying his commandments.

The Holy Spirit, witness to Jesus when he was baptized by John, remained with him and guided his public ministry (John 1:32). During the Last Supper, when Jesus challenged his disciples to prove their love by keeping his commandments, he prayed to the Father to give them another Paraclete, the Spirit of truth, to be with them forever (John 14:15-16). Their strength in bearing witness faithfully comes from this Paraclete, who stands alongside them, speaking as advocate, counselor, consoler and admonisher. Thus the faithful can understand that the Baptism of Jesus is linked intimately with the Hour of his death-and-resurrection. The Spirit guides the prayer of the Church, especially in the celebrating of the sacraments.

The image of a banquet for the poor (Isaiah 55:1-2) points to the ultimate communion with the living God, wherein the abundance of delicious food will be understood by Christians to be experienced in the Bread of Life. The promise of an everlasting covenant (Isa 55:3) is taken up by Jesus at the Last Supper. As individuals in need of nourishment for the journey of life, Christians learn that this journey is a pilgrimage of the entire Church toward the new Jerusalem. All are strengthened weekly or daily for their participation in the witness of the Church among the nations, called into service by the living God (Isa 55:4-5).