Jesus as Servant and Teacher

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The Baptism of the Lord
Sunday Readings for January 13, 2013 for Cycle C:
Is 42:1-7; Ps 29; Acts 10:34-38; Lk 3:15-16, 21-22

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As the liturgy moves from the festive season to "ordinary time," the Church commemorates the Baptism of Jesus as the sign that his public ministry begins as an act of solidarity with human beings in their need for repentance and divine forgiveness.

In the midst of the hum-drum of life, ordinary people may be so concerned about themselves and their families that they forget about their obligations to society at large. "My vote won't make any difference," they say and thus they disenfranchise themselves from the right and responsibility of citizenship. "Yes, someone must speak for the unborn child, the handicapped and the disoriented," they acknowledge but allow occasions for compassion to pass by unnoticed. Even the faithful need to be reminded that their baptism challenges them to reach out in Christ's name to a world in need.

At various points in the collection of instructions from the Babylonian Exile known as "Second Isaiah" (chapters 40-55), the prophet presented God's call to a teacher addressed as his "Servant." Moses and other prophets had been given this title in earlier centuries, showing that guiding the people into obedience was a mission analogous to the service of God constituted by public worship. The promised servant would be chosen, as Moses was, and endowed with the Spirit of God so that he could bring justice in accord with divine judgment to the nations. Is this to be achieved through authoritarian measures and terrifying decrees? No, by calm and persistent instruction, with a special care for the limitations of those needing guidance. Thus will they be cured of their blindness and led from the dungeon of their enslavement to sin into the light of God's truth. Indeed, the call "to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement..." (Is 42:7) may be taken literally, as an aspect of God's transformation of the situation endured by those in exile (see Is 29:18; 35:1-6; 61:1). Yet those marvels would be ordered to the greater gift of divine illumination.

St. Luke's description of John the Baptist points clearly to the understanding that Isaiah's consoling message is being fulfilled (Lk 3:4-6 quotes Is 40:3-5; Lk 4:18-19 quotes Is 61:1-2). No doubt he intended his report of the Father's approving words, "You are my beloved Son; on you my favor rests" (Lk 3:22) to refer back to Isaiah 42:1.

While each Gospel emphasizes the importance of prayer in the life of Jesus, Luke makes a special point of stating that Jesus prayed on several occasions of great significance. Of course prayer would prepare for and accompany the manifestation of the Holy Spirit and the approbation of the heavenly Father. At precisely the time when John's baptism of repentance linked Jesus with humanity in this desperate need, the presence of God is manifested to Jesus in a new way. Although Luke hints at Jesus' intimacy with the Father's will when he is found in the Temple
(2:49), the Master is now called to embark on the teaching and healing mission of the Servant of God. "This is the message that God has sent to the children of Israel, the good news of peace proclaimed through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all"(Acts 10:36).

In his Baptism Jesus identified himself with those seeking forgiveness and reconciliation with his Father. He humbled himself to share in our humanity with its frailties so that his baptism into death would be the foundation for a life of peace. In our baptism, we become recipients of the call to become children of God. This elevates us above the hopeless, alienated situation of humankind -- but precisely to enable us to exercise a role of service in union with the healing, peace-making ministry of Jesus. To what extent have we begun?