

Baptism of the Lord, Year C

Isaiah 42: 1-4, 6-7

This was probably written by an unknown poet near the end of the Babylonian exile.⁵ There are four sections in the book of Isaiah that are called the “suffering servant songs.” They depict in deeply touching poetry, a chosen servant who must suffer much because of fidelity to God. This reading is taken from the first of those songs. Isaiah describes the election, anointing and mission of the servant, as well as the way the servant will go about accomplishing the objectives set out by God.¹

Thus says the Lord: God is speaking in his heavenly courtroom. All the nations, which the preceding chapter had summoned to trial, as well as Cyrus, their conqueror, must look to this Servant for God’s judgment of salvation.⁴

1Here is my servant Authors and preachers from the first days of the Christian era have seen in Jesus the perfect image of the suffering servant. Indeed, Jesus himself quotes from the songs of Isaiah and sees himself as their fulfillment.¹ Although written over five hundred years before Christ was born, these prophecies are fulfilled so clearly in Jesus that Isaiah has been called the fifth Gospel.² **whom I uphold, my chosen one** Isaiah exhorts the people to look to the servant as God’s chosen one. He is “chosen” like Moses and David and all Israel. As the Servant, he fulfills the role of Davidic king, messianic king, and prophet.⁵ **with whom I am pleased,** When Jesus is baptized and thus publicly given his messianic role, the heavenly Father pronounced these same words over his Son. The words are repeated again at the Transfiguration as Jesus’ messianic glory shines brilliantly before the eyes of the apostles.⁴ **upon whom I have put my spirit;** This refers to God exerting power rather than to the third person of the Trinity.⁴ **he shall bring forth justice** To “bring forth justice” is a phrase that means that he is commissioned to carry out the divine will.⁵ **to the nations,** This servant’s role is not limited to Israel but would become universal.³

2not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. The Servant will work patiently and quietly to effect an interior reform on earth. He will not threaten nor condemn nor will he be a military leader.⁴

3A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench,

4until he establishes justice on the earth; This servant is being described as different from other leaders, not relying on military might nor upon treaties with other nations. He will not be a victorious warrior, nor king nor like other prophets shouting out their warnings. What the servant is will speak much louder than his words.³ **the coastlands will wait for his teaching.** Like Israel, now in exile, they shall undergo a painful expectancy before new life begins.⁵

5I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice, Cyrus was called “the champion of justice” but Jesus is called for “the victory of justice” over the whole world. **I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people,** This time the covenant is made not only with Israel, but through Israel with all nations.⁴ **a light for the nations,**

7to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness. Just as the Sinai covenant affected the liberation from Egyptian slavery, at the new exodus, there will be spiritual renewal. The close connection with verse 6 shows that the true light is teaching and moral reform. Without it, all men are blind.⁴

Acts 10:34-38

“What God has purified you are not to call unclean” was the message that Peter heard from a heavenly voice at just the time that messengers arrived from the Roman centurion named Cornelius who had been directed by a heavenly messenger to seek Peter out and to receive his Gospel. Upon visiting the household of Cornelius and seeing their faith, Peter preached to them, beginning with the baptism of John and ending with the commission of Jesus to preach the good news (in verse 43). Today’s scripture is taken from this sermon, which covers the same ground as the Gospel of Mark, which early tradition describes as a summary of Peter’s preaching.⁷

34Peter proceeded to speak to those gathered in the house of Cornelius, This was Peter’s first address to non-Jews. As in all Christian preaching to Gentiles, proofs from Scripture take a secondary place.⁸ **saying: in truth, I see that God shows no partiality.** This is similar to the reading last Sunday from Ephesians for it highlights the struggle on the part of the Jews to recognize that God is not partial to any one people.¹ God shows no favoritism to one nation over another in the New Covenant, but all stand as equal candidates for divine blessing and sonship.⁷ The Catechism says that “In every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to God.”⁶ (CCC 761)

35Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly This refers to one who practices righteousness, who approaches God with a sincere heart, which Peter seems to imply could be done even if one were not a Jew.⁵ **is acceptable to him.**

36You know the word that he sent to the Israelites as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all,

37what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, The revelation of God’s universal love began at the Jordan River, when a divine anointing made clear that, in Jesus, the establishment of God’s reign on earth has begun.¹

38show God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. **This was done at his Baptism, designating him as the Messiah.** St. Irenaeus tells us that “the name ‘Christ’ implies ‘he who anointed,’ ‘he who was anointed’ and ‘the very anointing with which he was anointed. The one who anointed is the Father, the one who was anointed is the Son, and he was anointed with the Spirit who is the anointing.”⁶ (CCC 438) **He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.”** Jesus’ works testify that he fits Isaiah’s portrait of the suffering servant.¹

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

“Christ’s Baptism in the Jordan” is the first luminous mystery of the rosary. For the Jews the Jordan River was not any ordinary water source. It was a river that symbolized new beginnings. Elijah the prophet was taken up to heaven at the Jordan. Elisha, his successor, began his prophetic ministry at this same spot. Naaman the Syrian was cured of his leprosy at this river. However, what stood out even more was its association with the Exodus story for after fleeing from slavery in Egypt and wandering in the desert for forty years, the Israelites finally entered the Promised Land by passing through the Jordan River. The prophets used the Exodus story as an image for what God would do in the messianic age. In choosing the Jordan River for his baptisms, John sent a powerful message: the new exodus is here! In inviting people to travel out into the desert, go down into the waters of the Jordan, and reenter the land, John was having the people reenact the Exodus story. This symbolic action expressed hope that the final great exodus was about to

take place. It is no wonder that there was so much enthusiasm and expectation surrounding John's movement.¹²

15The people were filled with expectation, and all were asking in their hearts whether John might be the Christ. The multitudes wonder if John is the Messiah. He denies this and speaks of the Messiah as one "mightier" than he.¹¹

16John answered them all, saying, "I am baptizing you with water, His baptism was symbolic, expressing the repentance of the sinner and effected of itself no interior sacramental change.¹³ but one mightier than I Jesus 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.⁵ is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Jesus' baptism in the Jordan was not a sacramental Baptism such as we have received from the Church because his saving death on the cross, which is the cause of all the graces of all the Sacraments, had not yet occurred. John the Baptist preached a baptism of repentance, which means that he invited people to express sorrow for their sins by taking a purely symbolic bath in the Jordan. John was announcing the coming of a new age of grace and mercy with a symbolic washing away of sin. God Himself had baptized in ages past to signal new beginnings. The whole world, which had sunk into sin was baptized in the great flood in the time of Noah. The people of Israel had been baptized twice during the Exodus to cleanse them from the idolatry of Egypt, once in the Red Sea as they were leaving Egypt, and a second time in the Jordan as they entered the Promised Land after forty years of wandering. John says that, while his baptism is merely one of water, the coming Messiah "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." Fire symbolizes the energy of the Holy Spirit, which transforms what He touches. He purifies and sanctifies. This includes the power needed to do God's will.²

21. After all the people had been baptized In Luke 1:17 the angel explains to Zechariah that his son, John, is "to prepare a perfect people for the Lord." Here we see a fulfillment of that mission.⁵ Note that NO REPLACEMENT FOR JUDAS WAS CONSIDERED IF HE HAD NOT BEEN WITH THE DISCIPLES FROM THE TIME OF JESUS' BAPTISM.

(Acts 1:22) **and Jesus also had been baptized** The baptism of Jesus marks his acceptance and the beginning of his mission as God's suffering Servant. He allows himself to be numbered among sinners. He is submitting himself entirely to his father's will.⁽⁶⁾ Jesus set the example of baptism which he would later teach as the means of being born again (Jn.

3:3-5).¹⁰ **and was praying,** Luke often depicts Jesus praying before significant moments in his life, which is a humble and trusting commitment of his human will to the loving will of the Father. According to St. Thomas, Jesus' prayer after his Baptism teaches us that after Baptism man needs to pray continually in order to enter heaven; for though sins are remitted through Baptism, there still remains the inclination to sin which assails us from within, and also the flesh and the devil which assail us from without.⁹ **heaven was opened**

22and the Holy spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. The dove is symbolic of peace and innocence. In certain churches, the Eucharist is reserved in a metal receptacle in the form of a dove suspended above the altar. Christian iconography traditionally uses a dove to suggest the Spirit.⁶ This would also seem to prefigure Pentecost.⁵ **And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son;** This is a confession of the divinity of Jesus. "When he attained to the perfect age", St. Thomas comments, "when the time came for him to teach, to

work miracles and to draw men to himself, then was it fitting for his Godhead to be attested from on high by the Father's testimony, so that his teaching might be the more credible."⁹ **with you I am well pleased.**" There are two parts to this event: First, it announces the mystery of the Holy Trinity. The voice is that of the Father who proclaims Jesus to be the Son and the Holy Spirit descends on him. Second, Jesus is the object of God's favor. This means for us that we please God to the extent that we are in communion with Jesus who alone enjoys all the favor of God.¹⁴ Here God proclaims his delight in his Son!

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) "Workbook For Lectors And Gospel Readers" by Aelred R. Rosser; (2) Commentary notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray, (3) "The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (4) "The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66" by Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., (5) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (6) "The Catechism of the Catholic Church," (7) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Acts of the Apostles," (8) "The Navarre Bible: Acts of the Apostles, (9) "The Navarre Bible: St. Luke," (10) "Crossing the Tiber" by Stephen K. Ray, (11) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Luke" (12) "The New Rosary In Scripture" by Edward Sri (13) "Dictionary of the Bible" by John L. McKenzie, S.J., and (14) "Saint Joseph Commentary On The Sunday Readings" by Achille Degeest, O.F.M.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.