

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year A

Baptism of the Lord

First reading:

(Isaiah 42.1-4, 6-7)

The Servant of the Lord

Jesus knew the scripture; it was the only book he would have known. When he heard the Voice from heaven and he experienced the Spirit of God coming upon him, he must immediately have thought of this passage from Isaiah.

He was, then, this mysterious Servant of the Lord about whom the scripture spoke. He was to bring Israel back to the Lord. He must have known that the Servant was to suffer and to reach his fulfilment only through bitter suffering and death for others. This realization must have been with him throughout his ministry, a dark shadow and a challenge to service.

At the same time, it was a confirmation of the love of the Father who was 'well pleased' in him. This was to be the model for all Christian suffering. We all know someone - we may even have experienced it ourselves - who has to suffer lovingly and generously in caring for others. The awesome privilege of suffering after the model of the Servant who is Jesus must draw respect and comfort for those who serve in this way. It is a confirmation of God's love for them.

Question:

How can I tell what God wants from me??

Second reading:

(Acts 10.34-38)

Peter Prepares Cornelius

St Peter was making this speech at the house of the Roman centurion, Cornelius. Peter himself was still reeling from the shock of being told that foods (like pork) which he had, as a faithful Jew, all his life, considered unclean were perfectly acceptable. Now he is about to welcome into the Church a non-Jew, a gentile!

Before he could even finish his speech, the Holy Spirit came down on Cornelius and his household, just as the Spirit had come down on the disciples at Pentecost. All this is the consequence of the coming of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism. That was when Jesus began his mission, which is so strikingly described here as 'the Good News of peace'.

Religion, and even Christianity, has so often been the cause of strife and quarrelling, rivalry between different Christian churches, rivalry between Christians, Jews and Muslims. We easily forget that the Spirit of Jesus is the Spirit of peace, openness, welcome. The Spirit of Jesus does not build barriers but dissolves them, does not inflict wounds but heals them, does not push people away but embraces them. Is this the community of Christ that I am trying to build in those around me?

Question:

Do I put up any barriers, exclude anyone from Christ's love?

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Gospel:

(Matthew 3.13-17)

The Baptism of Jesus

The account of the baptism of Jesus in Mark, the earliest gospel, is also the simplest. In Mark, the Voice from heaven is addressed to Jesus himself, and there is no sign that others heard it; it is an experience of Jesus: 'You are my Son.'

In Matthew, the voice is addressed to the bystanders: 'This is my Son.' This makes the private revelation into a public scene, a declaration that Jesus' work is about to begin. In the same way, our baptism is a public scene, a declaration that we are committed to Christ in his Church - even if we don't remember it!

Matthew also records the little dialogue of John's unwillingness to baptize Jesus. Why should Jesus enter into the community of repentance that John was forming? He was no sinner! However, it was a gesture that Jesus was entering fully into the condition of all humanity. He shared fully in human nature, the nature of a fallen humanity. At the outset of his ministry, he must show this, for only so could he redeem the fallen human race. Jesus is not merely passive, for he himself joins with John in making the positive step: 'We must do all that righteousness demands.'

Question:

A quick review: what difference has baptism made to my life?
