

Commentary on Sunday Scripture – Year B

Baptism of the Lord

First reading:

(Isaiah 55.1-11)

Preparing the Way

The reading from Isaiah is positively bursting with ideas that prepare us for today's festival. To begin with, Isaiah proclaims the invitation to the rich messianic banquet. Perhaps we have had enough of rich food for the moment! But the picture of the Israelite relaxedly quaffing wine under his fig tree was an important part of the expectation of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps the social aspects of the banquet are more important in Jesus' frequent teaching about the banquet, and especially the warmth of the host and the company of the saints. But at Cana he does change the water into huge quantities of wine!

Second, there is the aspect of witness. The son of David is a witness calling to God the nations that do not know him, or the word of God that issues from the mouth of God and does not return without accomplishing his task. By our baptism we, too, are constituted witnesses for the world, accomplices of the word of God. But witnesses to what? The last part of the reading centres on the forgiveness of God, for God is nothing if not a forgiving God and the covenant nothing if not a covenant of forgiveness. The baptism of John, which Jesus himself underwent, is an invitation to change our ways and return to God.

Question:

How can I prepare the way for the Lord?

Second reading:

(1 John 5.1-9))

The Love of the Children of God

This is our first reading from the attractive First Letter of John, mostly about love, which is usually read during the Easter season. It slips in here to emphasize the mutual love of Father and Son, so fully expressed in the Baptism - 'with you I am well pleased'.

By our own baptism, we share in this love. But, as with all love, there is a price to pay, not only in obedience to his commandments. It is a victory, a love that conquers the world. How it conquers the world is hinted by the mysterious reference that Jesus 'came by water and blood'.

With John, there are always multiple layers of meaning. Does it mean the water and blood that flowed from his side as he was pierced by the soldier's spear on the Cross? Or is it - and this understanding lies deep in the tradition of the Church - that the water symbolizes baptism and the blood symbolizes the Eucharist? The sacraments flow from the side of Christ as he breathes forth, or gives over, his Spirit to the new community consisting of his Mother and the Beloved Disciple, the representatives of the Church. It is by the water and the blood that we meet Christ in these two basic sacraments.

Question:

Is the crucifixion compatible with God's love for his Son?

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Gospel:

(Mark 1.7-11)

The Baptism of Jesus

What can Jesus have experienced? It is described as 'the heavens torn apart', a voice, and the Spirit coming down like a dove. It must have given him the experience of being treasured, being embraced by the person whom he called 'Father'.

But he is given a task, too, for the Spirit of God is an empowering Spirit. It must have felt like a new impetus, a thrill of challenge, a surge of energy and opportunity, an exciting new task. In this new Spirit, he went out to bring the good news of peace, gradually gathering his community and spreading God's healing love by his personality, his teaching and his healing.

This is the power that baptism has given to us also, to bring God's healing and God's love, to build a community of love that reflects and extends God's own love. Jesus must have been daunted by the task. He knew it would test him to the limit of his endurance, but he knew he had received the power of God, and he put his trust in his Father. He never promised us at baptism that it would be easy to live as Christians, but he did promise us that he would give us the surge of strength and power that is the Holy Spirit.

Question:

Has my baptism empowered me?
