

Sunday By Sunday

Our Regular Guide to the Word Of God in the Sunday Liturgy

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FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD: B

12.01.03 Mk 1, 7-11

“ he saw the heavens torn apart” (Mk 1, 10). The majesty of this divine event comes in the dramatic recollection of the Baptist, as recorded by Mark. Jesus shows his solidarity with the work of his cousin by coming to John for baptism at the Jordan . He is empowered for public ministry. As John knows, it is not a meeting of equals. Jesus the light seeks John the shadow, the Word of God seeks out the Voice. The Voice is silent in awe as the Father acknowledges the Son in the peaceful self-possession of the Spirit. The heavens proclaim the glory of God.· Pope John-Paul has written of the Baptism of Jesus as a Mystery of Light - a mystery because it shows forth the nature of God in a way we could not possibly have known from reason alone. God freely chooses to reveal himself to us. The love of the Father is made known through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. The light here is the unapproachable light of the godhead, yet made accessible to the weakness of man in the humanity of Jesus, acknowledged here by the favour of the Father and the coming down of the Holy Spirit.·

The Baptism of the Lord marks the end of the hidden years of Jesus, and the beginning of his public ministry. Quiet obscurity gives way to dynamic activity, and God is revealed in Jesus not as a static and far away concept but as an active, ardent and loving presence among us. Acknowledged by the Father and blessed in the Spirit, the inner life of the Trinity becomes known and shared among those who welcome Jesus. This divine and loving presence is still among us in the tabernacles of our churches, drawing us into the healing life of the Trinity.

SECOND SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B

19.01.03 Jn 1, 35-42

Wasting time together can be a source of true joy for friends who love deeply. This is the experience of John and Andrew with Jesus as they progress from being disciples of the Baptist to being followers of the Lamb. Andrew is mentioned, John not directly. But the evangelist shows first hand knowledge of the events described and eschews the temptation to draw attention to self as he writes his account. Staying with Jesus must have been like walking with God in

the cool of the afternoon, a delightful image of original blessing from the Book of Genesis (cf. Gen 3, 8).

But the Lamb is one destined to be slain. Original blessing was violated by Original Sin, as our first parents brought ruin upon us through rebellion against God: 'I will not serve'. Our nature is damaged to the core, but not destroyed. Thus Jesus can fulfil the plan of his Father in creation by taking on our human nature and showing it in perfection to a fallen world. Yet men preferred darkness to the Light (cf. Jn 1, 9-10). At the very hour the Passover lamb was sacrificed, they crucified that perfect human nature and watched it die, only to see it rise restored on the third day (cf. Jn 19, 14.31; 20, 20).

"Where do you live?' 'Come and see'" (Jn 1, 38-39). From natural curiosity, Andrew and John are surprised by joy at the presence of the Messiah, and the ready welcome received. Truth is rarely a total surprise to us, since we were created by Truth and for Truth. John and Andrew spend the rest of the day with Jesus because their hearts burn within them as they come alive in the company of he who was their first beginning, is their present fulfillment and will be their final end (cf. Lk 24, 32). As soberly as mist descending at dawn, the disciples are intoxicated with love of God.

THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B

26.01.03 Mk 1,14-20

"After John had been arrested" (Mk 1, 14). Jesus takes on where John the Baptist leaves off. In the obscurity of Herod's dungeon, John is quite willing to be forgotten and to witness in the dark, even if this leads to his murder (cf. Mk 6, 17ff). The Baptist clings to his work with the single-mindedness of one totally stripped of self. 'Earthly longings have been crucified; in me there is left no spark of desire for mundane things, but only a murmur of living water that whispers within me, "Come to the Father"' (Rom 6, 1-8). Like Ignatius of Antioch, John possesses nothing but God. In this he possesses all.

"The time has come" (Mk 1, 15). Jesus' first words in Mark's gospel echo throughout the universe. For billions of years, from the first moment God poised the energies of our cosmos in being at the Big Bang, creation has been building up to these words and this divine presence in the world. Through his words and works, the Messiah begins to weave that divine thread in the hearts, souls and lives of men that will draw them back to the Father and restore to them that life in God that was to be theirs right from the first nanoseconds of creation.

"He called them at once" (Mk 1, 20). When God calls there can be no second thoughts. It is as if Jesus is saying, 'Work has to be done, the time is right, you are the men chosen, will you come now?' Our Lord is like Elijah in the Old Testament calling Elisha to the work of prophecy, and brooking no delay (1Kings 19, 19-21). There is no time lapse in God between the word spoken and the work achieved. The disciples may have been slow to understand, but they showed

themselves true sons of the Covenant by responding so readily to the call of God here.

FEAST OF THE PRESENTATION OF THE LORD: B

02.02.03 Lk 2, 22-42

Writing for a gentile audience, Luke is deeply sensitive to the workings of the Jewish Law. Four times he emphasizes the fidelity of Joseph and Mary to the Law of the Lord (Lk 2, 22.23.24.39). The parents of Jesus go up to the Temple to fulfill a ritual of their religion (Lev 12, 8). Being a firstborn male, Jesus must be consecrated to God. (Ex 13, 1). Like Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna belong to the small remnant of Israel . This minority of God's people live their faith in humility and faithfulness to the prophets' teaching. God knows how to make himself known to them.-

The best- shared love of two people will not prevent each remaining a mystery to the other. This will be more acute for those in relationship with the divine, most especially for Mary. She will grieve to see her Son die upon the cross, but she will also suffer because she will not always understand what her Son does. God does not watch our fidelity from heaven, but rather seeks us. He tries us in the sense of asking us to reveal ourselves. The love of the Father will be a cross for Jesus, and a sword that pierces the heart for Mary (Lk 2, 35).-

Jesus is "a light to enlighten the pagans, and the glory of your people Israel " (Lk 2, 32). In both his writings, Luke synthesizes a deep respect for the Jewish Law with the concerns of gentile converts to Christianity as to their place within the new dispensation preached by Jesus and upheld in the Church. Simeon represents this synthesis in his own person. He prophesizes under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and joyfully looks forward to being gathered to his fathers, as the light of God shines forth from the Temple in Jerusalem to the four corners of the earth.

FIFTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B

09.02.03 Mk 1, 29-39

By the Sea of Galilee , archaeologists have discovered the remains of a first century church amidst the ruins of the biblical town of Capernaum . Called the 'Domus Ecclesia', it is an ordinary room in a house typical of Roman-constructed Palestinian towns in that area. Later, the room was converted into a place of worship. The evidence points to this site being the house of Simon, and this room being the location of the miraculous cure of Simon's mother-in-law. Such houses

would be built around an enclosed courtyard, with a single door in a wall leading out onto the street.

“The whole town came crowding round the door” (Mk 1, 33). Jesus and Simon’s household would have been protected from invasion by the wall enclosing the courtyard they lived off, but the door in this wall would have been crowded by those desperate to gain a favour from the miracle worker, and healing from their ills. The feeling of mayhem as these poor creatures besiege Simon’s house is acute. Jesus must have been bled dry by their demands, though his very goodness would have meant that every one was seen. Long after sunset, Jesus tends the sick and works on into the night (Mk 1, 32).

But does Jesus find any faith among those who make such unremitting demands upon him? He is becoming renowned for what he does, not known for who he is. He can have slept hardly at all, but very early in the morning he slips away from Capernaum to be alone with the Father (Mk 1, 35). Our prayer can be little more than ceaseless demands, and sulks when we do not get what we want. We do not stop to praise and thank Jesus, and be with him in quiet. We say we have great faith, but have never really known the Lord.

SIXTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B

16.02.03 Mk 1, 40-45

The loneliness of Jesus comes through in Mark’s gospel more than in any other. The more he does, the less he is understood. This encounter with the leper is moving in its warmth and compassion, but the roles become strangely reversed as a result of Jesus’ goodness. The leper is an outcast in Jewish society who is cured by the Messiah, who then ensures that his healer becomes an outcast by disobedient imprudence in spreading news of the event everywhere. Jesus can no longer travel from town to town, but must inhabit the isolated spaces outside each settlement like a leper.

The depths of Jesus’ compassion are evoked by the sight of a leper so afflicted and in distress. “Of course I want to” (Mk 1,41) must rank among the most moving and consoling of all Jesus’ sayings. We need to learn compassion from Jesus, even when there is little on offer in terms of gratitude. Our actions can often be so ‘me-orientated’ that we use the person consoled for our own advantage. Our Lord does the opposite here, as goodness flows naturally from a heart overflowing with pity. Charity will not wait, and the plea is no sooner spoken than granted by the goodness of the Master.

Jesus fulfils all righteousness, and is the only Jew who is utterly faithful to the Covenant with God. “Go and show yourself to the priest, and make the offering for your healing prescribed by Moses as evidence of your recovery” (Mk 1, 44) is the command of a loyal and upright Israelite. The spirit behind the regulation is that so gracious a work of God as a recovery from leprosy must mean that the individual is no longer unclean and cursed by heaven. This must be formally

ratified by the priest, so that the appropriate sacrifice of thanksgiving may be made.

SEVENTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: B

23.02.03 Mk 2, 1-12

“Seeing their faith” (Mk 2, 5). Jesus thirsts to bring us to faith. He is not some medical conjuror with a class act out for himself. He longs to bring in the Kingdom of God and to draw human hearts back to the Father. He longs for the opening of the eyes of faith more deeply than for the curing of eyes born blind. This is the heart of the Saviour’s loneliness and isolation as he toils among men. We see the miracle performed, but fail to perceive who it is that brings such power for good among us. We will not believe.·

It is not the faith of the paralytic that leads to his cure, but the faith of the four stretcher bearers who take up the roof over the place where Jesus was and lower their friend down in front of the Master. History does not record the reaction of volatile Simon to the wanton destruction of the roof of his house! Jesus, however, discerns faith in the hearts of those given to such dramatic extremes and acts on their behalf in healing the paralytic. We must never cease to pray in faith for each other. The Lord listens.·

Lack of faith may have been troubling Jesus in the moments before the lowering of the paralytic. Judging from the later obstinacy and ready criticism of the leading figures filling the room where Jesus speaks, the atmosphere cannot have been calm or accepting before this dramatic event. Those with faith were outside the house and could not even approach the Master. Those with cold hearts and a leading position in the town crowded Jesus around with walls of isolation and heard his words with deaf ears. A broken roof was a small price for a breakthrough in the spreading of the kingdom.