

The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord

January 8-9, 2011

St. John the Evangelist Parish

Deacon James J. Benjamin

Isaiah 42: 1-4,6-7 Psalm 42 Acts 10: 34-38 Matthew 3: 13-17

With this Sunday we end the Christmas season. The Lord's baptism is a kind of transition, moving us from the manifestation of God on earth, at different occasions during the season, to Ordinary Time, where we begin to consider the mission of Jesus and our mission as well.

God manifested himself on earth with the birth of Jesus, accented when the three Magi came from a far country to worship this newborn God-King, and culminating today in the words that boomed from heaven, "this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

God is here among us, Emmanuel is with us now as he was back then.

Today we focus on what the mission of Jesus will be while he is here. Isaiah speaks of that work in the first reading. I was struck by the fact that the word "justice " appears three times in that short passage. Isaiah is telling us that the mission of the Suffering Servant will be to bring justice to the earth. Scholars are divided about whether Isaiah was referring to Israel itself or to a specific person who would shepherd Israel to the grand destiny that Isaiah imagined.

The Church has always believed that Jesus was the embodiment of Isaiah's prophecy, and it is not unreasonable to think that Jesus saw himself in that role as well, since he must have known the Hebrew scriptures very well. And he did certainly bring a message of justice to the people of Israel; he brought that message without violence, always with love, forgiveness, and with a preference for those who were on the margins of society, the underprivileged, the handicapped and the forgotten.

Rather than breaking the bruised reed or quenching the smoldering wick, as Isaiah puts it so poetically, the presence of Jesus made the vulnerable and weak that he saw every day have confidence, become stronger and begin to live lives with more fulfillment and joy. They were like candles whose light was sputtering, almost going out, and the presence of Jesus in their lives made their light shine more brightly. The poor and the oppressed in the land were like bruised reeds that were about to break, but the justice that Jesus brought to them made them strong once again, gave them new life and vigor.

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It's interesting that the second part of Isaiah's reading goes from the third person, where he says, for example, "he shall bring forth justice for the nations," to the first person, "I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice..." I imagine Jesus read that "you" as referring to him.

I can't help thinking that the switch from third person to first person is no accident, that the prophet is talking to you and me today, right now. So, now listen to these lines as if they are being spoken to you. And as you listen, imagine what they might mean in your life, for your baptism prepared you for a mission too.

Read verses 6 & 7 slowly: "I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of justice, I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon those who live in darkness."

In this year of our Lord 2011, how can you bring light to someone in darkness? Who can you release from confinement...due to a lack of self-confidence, perhaps, or an inability to trust, or fear of taking a risk?

The baptism of Jesus by his cousin, John, was an important event in salvation history for a couple of reasons. Jesus submitted to being baptized over John's objections because he was determined to act in righteousness. For Matthew, that meant that Jesus was determined to do the will of his Father; that was what being righteous meant. Jesus also was casting his lot with ordinary people, including all those others whom John baptized and all of the baptized, including you and me. Jesus was saying through the act of being baptized that he was one of us, truly a man as well as true God, that he would experience everything in life as we would (sin being the only exception). Jesus was entering into solidarity with all his brothers and sisters. Finally, his baptism was the event that signaled the onset of his mission...ratified so that there could be no mistake, by the voice of God himself announcing Jesus as the beloved, the one whom God favors. Jesus would bring God's justice to the world.

As people who call themselves followers of Jesus, we share in his mission. We too are the bringers of justice where it is needed. We too are the voices of compassion, healing, forgiveness to those who find themselves at the margins, those who maybe have put

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themselves in some kind of prison, some kind of darkness. Do you know anyone like that? I know that I do.

Imagine that you are being brought up out of the water, soaking wet, water dripping off your hair and your face, and you hear that booming voice calling you God's beloved, his favored one, the one he blesses, the one he inspires to continue the work of his Son. Can you imagine that? That voice is for you, that voice of blessing and anointing is meant for your ears.

You and I are the ones to bring about the justice that Isaiah prophesies; it would be nice to say that the job belongs to someone else, but, my friends, we are that someone else. Maybe that sounds like bad news, but it is not. It is what we were put here to accomplish, each one of us in our own way. I suspect that the way in which we live out our mission will be a matter of great focus and interest when we face our own personal final judgment.

Many, of course, walk away from the great challenge of being that light to the nations, that giver of sight to the blind and bringer of freedom to those in their prisons of self-hatred, self-doubt, loneliness and despair, anger and pride. Success is not the final goal; making the attempt is. The temptation is always to walk away: it's too hard, I'm just setting myself up to be hurt, it doesn't seem that I'm getting anywhere. Maybe you have had some of those thoughts; we all have at one time or other.

But you are the favored one of God; you are the adopted son and the adopted daughter of God, thanks to Jesus who did his saving work for our sake. God is so well pleased with you, and he will be with you on your mission. God's Holy Spirit is with us always, even on the days when we feel discouraged and downhearted.

Our mission is to keep on keeping on, not to give up but to stay the course, without violence but with gentleness and concern for the ones in those prisons, the ones who can't see which way to go, the ones who are unable to hear the voice of God leading them, those people in our lives who feel unloved and unlovable. Our mission is to touch them, to be the healers, the ones who forgive, the ones with compassion. Certainly not an easy mission, but could there be anything more worthwhile for us to do?