

## **Baptism of the Lord**

**January 13, 2008**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The words of the prophet Isaiah in today's first reading go back 500 years before Christ. This passage was intended for the Jews who were in exile in Babylon. God is, through the prophet, introducing a person referred to only as God's servant to his people. God is quite pleased with his servant. In a non-violent way, God's servant will establish justice in the world, be a light to the nations and liberation for captives. Scholars debate who this servant might have been 500 years before Christ, but with the coming of Christ, there is no doubt who is God's perfect servant. At Jesus' baptism, God introduces Jesus to the world, not just as his servant, but as his beloved Son with whom he is well-pleased.

### **HOMILY**

If you struggle to understand the baptism of Jesus, you're not alone. Even John the Baptist had difficulty understanding why Jesus came to him for baptism. As John said "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?"

The baptism of Jesus is a mystery worthy of our contemplation. Certainly Pope John Paul considered it as something worth meditating on when he made it one of the mysteries in the new set of mysteries he created for the rosary: the luminous mysteries or the mysteries of light.

Our business manager, Carol Roosa, is taking a course at the Athenaeum to become a parish administrator. She had to present a paper last week and the topic was baptism. The professor was quite impressed with it and so she volunteered to preach this Sunday. I said "no." She said it would only take an hour and fifteen minutes. You would be happy to know I stood my ground. Besides, only priests and deacons are allowed to do a homily. I say all of this to illustrate there is so much that could be said about baptism. I'm not going to say it all. My few words today will, I hope, throw a little light on the sacrament of baptism and might help make the baptism of Jesus a little more understandable.

First I want to point out one way in which the baptism of Jesus by John was totally different from our sacrament of baptism. Then I want to mention one way in which they are similar.

If I were to ask the average Catholic what do you think of when you hear the word baptism, most would answer, "Baptism takes away original sin." That's true but there is a better answer. Let me illustrate. (show wallet) Now many of you know what this is: a wallet. And it's empty, and some of you might relate to that too. That's basically what original sin is. It is emptiness, like this wallet. It's a big nothing. We are empty of God's grace and life. Suppose, for example, by some unbelievable odds, I would win a million dollars in the lottery. I would get that big check (less taxes) and put it in the wallet. If someone were to ask me, "what's in your wallet?," I don't know

what I would tell them, but I don't think I would answer "the emptiness in my wallet is gone." But that's what we say when we define baptism as the sacrament that takes away original sin. That definition only emphasizes the emptiness and not the fullness. It doesn't reflect the blessings that suddenly fill us at baptism: the blessings of God's life, of being children of God, the blessings of the Holy Spirit, the blessing of belonging to the family of God, the blessing and hope of sharing in eternal happiness with God. In Jesus there was no emptiness. In him dwells the fullness of the divinity (Col. 2,9) as St. Paul tells us. He was, from all eternity, God's beloved Son. Jesus had no need of baptism in any form. In this respect Jesus' baptism by John made no change in him as the sacrament of baptism did for us. Jesus baptism by John provides an occasion for us to reflect on our own baptism and the grace that it brought us.

Now I want to describe one way in which Jesus' baptism by John and the sacrament of baptism we received are similar. They are similar in that they are both a commitment. John's baptism was a public commitment people made to live holy lives and to prepare for the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus, in being baptized, was publicly committing himself to do God's will and to preach and build the kingdom of God. Baptism is that for us too. We are committed in a public event to belong to God, to be God's obedient child, God's lover, God's representative. It's something like declaring one's candidacy, not for public office, but for the office of Christian in the world. Most likely someone made that commitment for us, most probably our parents. They made that commitment for us with the intention of directing us in God's ways. Eventually, we have to make that commitment our own if our baptism is going to mean anything at all. On this feast of the baptism of Jesus, we have a good opportunity to recommit ourselves to Jesus. The effects and blessings of baptism remain with us as long as we do not turn our hearts away from the Father who long ago chose us to be his son or daughter in the sacrament. In this way Jesus' baptism by John is very much like our own, not a private, secret event but a public, open declaration of our commitment to love and serve God and others as Jesus, the perfect Son of God did. Amen.

## **Second Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**January 20, 2008**

**INTRODUCTION:** Last week in our first reading we heard about God's servant who would bring justice and light to the world. We hear again about God's servant leading the people of Israel back to God, and bringing God's salvation to the ends of the earth. These passages about God's servant (there are four of them) were written over 500 years before Christ. Scholars do not know exactly who might have fit the description of God's servant at that time, but with the advantage of hindsight we see how perfectly the servant songs describe God's perfect servant, Jesus Christ.

**HOMILY:** Today I want to talk about gifts and sheep. First gifts. There is no doubt about it, gift giving is a part of us. We just finished a very busy time of gift giving and already the stores have

put out things for Valentine's Day. Sometimes gifts are not sincere, they are given with strings attached or because they are expected or to gain someone's favor. But most of us give gifts to one another simply out of appreciation or gratitude or love.

Just as much as it is a part of our nature to give gifts to one another, it has always been basic to human nature to offer gifts to God. I would like to think most of the time our offering to God comes from appreciation or gratitude or love, and it probably does, but in the back of our minds we're also hoping to win a few points with God. That's okay. God understands and appreciates hearing from us even when it's for our own self-interest. Didn't he teach us to ask for the things we need.

When we give a gift to God, it is called sacrifice. All ancient religions that I know of had some form of sacrifice, which indicates to me that sacrifice is instinctual. Some primitive religions offered human sacrifice, the implication being that human life was the most precious gift they had to offer. In the story of Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son Isaac, God revealed to the Jewish people this was not what he wanted. The Israelites offered food and drink which symbolized their life. Without food and drink we die, so in the offering it was their way of saying they recognized they owed their life to God. Grain and wine and oil were offered, but the primary offering was an animal (when they had the means to afford it), most frequently a lamb. Thus my second theme: sheep. Other than seeing lamb on a restaurant menu occasionally, or counting sheep when we turn in for the night, the thought of a lamb seldom crosses our mind. But sheep were, and still are in the Middle East, as common as cell phones are in our culture today. They provided wool for clothing, meat for festive occasions, and sacrifices for their God. In the Temple of Jerusalem, priests offered a lamb twice a day as a sacrifice. At the time of Jesus, on the Preparation Day before Passover, the Jewish historian Josephus tells us over 250,000 lambs were sacrificed for the traditional Passover meal. Although this number could be an exaggeration, Josephus is telling us the priests were kept mighty busy on that day. The sacrifice of the paschal lamb took place only in Jerusalem, beginning at noon. This was the same time Jesus was condemned and died on the cross. St. John, in his gospel, specifically connects Jesus' sacrifice with the sacrifice of the paschal lambs when he tells us that when Jesus was pierced with a lance it fulfilled the Scripture, which said "not one of his bones shall be broken." That was a requirement for the Paschal lamb. (Jn 19,36)

Jesus' sacrifice of his life was offered in perfect obedience and love and fidelity to his Father and to the mission his Father gave him. Because it was the sacrifice of the Son of God it had infinite value. Because of its infinite value, it made all other sacrifices obsolete. Moreover, Jesus made it possible for all of us to share in this perfect sacrifice to the Father when at the Last Supper he said the words: "do this in memory of me." To digress for a moment: Somehow in this day and age, it seems the more we have been blessed, the more we take for granted and the less grateful we have become. I sense that many people these days think of God as some kind of rich uncle who is there to give them what they want. When he doesn't do so, they just turn their backs and sort of say: why waste time on someone who won't do what I want them to do.

Back to the gospel. Could John the Baptist have had any of this in mind about Jesus as the

perfect sacrifice when he called Jesus the “lamb of God?” Certainly John recognized the saving mission of Jesus for he refers to Jesus as the one who would take away the sin of the world. I hope it doesn’t complicate things too much if I say the following: In the Greek John uses the words: “lamb of God.” Scholars have gone back to the Aramaic which is what Jesus and the Baptist would have spoken most of the time and they tell us the Aramaic word for “lamb” was talya, which also meant “servant.” Thus we see the title “Lamb of God” connected with the first reading about God’s servant who would be a light to the nations that God’s salvation might reach to the ends of the earth.

I want to conclude by making one last reference to the term “Lamb of God.” Here we can look at the Book of Revelation (a.k.a. the Apocalypse). Jesus is represented there also as a lamb, a lamb who was slain, but who is now enthroned and glorified, praised and worshipped by all the heavenly hosts. From the throne of God and from the lamb flows life and blessings of every kind. Those who will enjoy these blessings and who will share in his victory are those who have followed the lamb. The Lamb of God is not just a perfect gift to God, but the way to eternal life for all of us. As we offer our perfect gift to God through Jesus our paschal lamb and worthy servant, may it help us be more faithful and grateful servants of our God.

### **Third Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**January 27, 2008**

**INTRODUCTION:** Galilee is located about 75 miles north of Jerusalem. With cars and expressways, that doesn’t seem very far today, but since most people traveled on foot at the time of Jesus, it was a considerable distance. Galilee had a difficult history. Seven hundred years before Christ the Assyrians destroyed Galilee and took most of its citizens, the ones they didn’t kill, and moved them far away from their homes in Galilee. That kept conquered nations from regrouping and rebelling against them. A lot of pagans were moved into Galilee. By the time of Jesus seven hundred years later, there were still a lot of pagans living there and Jews as well who had moved back so the population was pretty well mixed.

In spite of its destruction by the Assyrians, and the devastation they left behind, the prophet Isaiah, who was at that time living in Jerusalem, foresaw good things for Galilee. Into the spiritual and social darkness that covered the land, Isaiah said a light would shine. You might remember those lines from the first reading on Christmas. St. Matthew quotes this long passage from Isaiah to tell us Jesus was the fulfillment of that prophecy. It would have been normal for a religious teacher like Jesus to do his preaching and teaching mainly in Jerusalem. (Joachim Jeremias pg 242) Jesus however chose to begin his ministry in Galilee where he spent most of his life. Jesus was the light that the people of Galilee, the people living in darkness, had longed for. In these readings Galilee is called by the names of two of the tribes of Israel that originally settled there: Zebulun and Naphtali.

**HOMILY:** According to the Bible, the first gift God created was light. Afterwards, when God was creating other things like fish and birds and cattle and creeping things and animals and human beings he gave us all eyes to be able to appreciate what the light revealed to us. And he gave us a brain to be able to interpret, to a greater or lesser degree, what is seen. Although we wonder at times how intelligent human beings are, science tells us we humans have the most developed brain of all life on this planet.

With our imaginative and creative and logical minds we can see things that do not even exist, including abstract ideas. We speak in terms of light and seeing when we have ideas, such as: "I see how that's done," or "this just dawned on me," or "I saw the light." This notion of seeing something with our mind's eye also applies to spiritual things too. St. Matthew describes Jesus' ministry in Galilee in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "the people who sit in darkness have seen a great light." Jesus spoke of light to describe his own ministry when he said: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (Jn 8,12) The term "revelation" is a theological term that identifies this light that God gives us. When we let ourselves be guided by that light it is called "faith." Faith is nothing other than a way of seeing with God's own eyes. Our faith gives us a vision that ironically comes, not through what we see with our eyes or create with our minds, but through what we hear with our ears! It tells us why we were created, how we are to live, how we are to treat one another, what is going to happen after we die. It is a vision that is sometimes crystal clear, like when Jesus tells us about the importance of love for God and for each other. Other times it is blurry; for example, when St. Paul talks about the next life, he tells us "at present we see indistinctly, as in a mirror" (mirrors were not so wonderful in those days.) Faith is a way of seeing that is based simply on the word Jesus spoke to us. In some cases, what we see in faith contradicts what we see with our eyes, like: "This is my body." It contradicts what we see, but in faith we choose not to believe our eyes but to believe God's word which we have considered to be more reliable. I wonder how much brighter life would be for all of us and for the world in general if our minds and hearts were more open to the light that Christ has brought us.

When we were baptized a candle was given to us with the words, "Receive the light of Christ." For most of us that candle was given to our parents or sponsors to hold for us. It was up to them to help us live by that light. Obviously we have lived by that light or we wouldn't be here today. I commend you for that and thank you for it.

But that light should not be kept hidden. Through confirmation we have been commissioned to bring that light to others. Jesus not only said "I am the light of the world, but he also said "you are the light of the world." Today we heard about Jesus choosing four disciples who would one day set the world on fire with his light. But they did their job a long time ago and passed Christ's light on to others, and those others passed it on to others and eventually it got to us. We have the faith because someone led us to it. If others in the future are to have the faith, it will depend on us. We have to share with others the light we have received. We don't have to get up and preach to do that. We can do it by the way we live, by being morally good, honest, loving people. We can invite people to come to church with us. When we have the opportunity, we can share our faith by simply telling others what our faith means to us. When we try to debate

doctrine, we can get in a big argument, but if we tell someone how much my faith means to us, who can argue with that?

In summary, God has blessed us in many ways. One of the reasons we're here today is to give thanks (that's what Eucharist means). He created light and gave us the ability to see by it. But God gave us the greatest gift of all when he sent his Son, Jesus, to us and gave us the ability to believe in him. For his light will enlighten our lives throughout eternity. May others come to walk in his light too. Amen.