**THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD Year C**

**January 9th 2022**

The readings I have concentrated on are those printed in the Sunday Missal for Year C though those for Year A may also be used instead. This year the Gospel reading is from Saint Luke.

The Baptism of the Lord was the primary mystery celebrated in the Eastern Empire at the Epiphany. Christmas was a Western and Latin festival which the Orthodox have studiously ignored. Our current enthusiasm for it is driven by commercial marketing and materialism and obscures the fact that the Baptism festival is equally valuable. In the West, Jesus’ Baptism was relegated to a subordinate place in the Epiphany season. It has now been restored to something of its former prominence by being assigned to the Sunday after January 6

The whole life of Christ was understood as a series of Epiphanies, as his disciples grew in understanding. His Baptism was the first of these being the first occasion on which the public outside his family came to see him. Up to this point his life had been hidden, but from this point onwards, will be exposed to the glare of a celebrity. His Baptism thus marks the line between legend and history.

**Isaiah Chapter 40: 1-5. 9-11**

This is the opening passage of a book that occupies chapters 40 to 55 of Isaiah. The author is called II-Isaiah and his work the Book of Consolation. The exuberant language serves a purpose.

It is evident that, among the exiles, there was little yearning for a return to their traditional homeland. There was a rising generation doing quite nicely in Babylon. Babylon was civilised and cultured and a devastated homeland of their ancestors did not appeal. Babylon was sited on the warm fertile plain of the Euphrates, while Jerusalem was on a barren rocky mountain. The prophet tried hard to drum up some enthusiasm. While, humanly speaking, there were no grounds for optimism, he can assure his people that God is ready once again to bring them out of captivity and into the promised land. This time Yahweh will lead them in solemn procession along a Via Sacra, a processional way slicing through mountain, valley and desert, all the way from Babylon to Jerusalem. God will manifest his glory (v. 3) through his saving deed on behalf of his people.

In his imagination the prophet hears the voice of God bidding a crier run to Jerusalem to carry the good news that the Lord leads his people to freedom. 'Good tidings': it is here that the New Testament writers found their 'gospel' —Good News. His message is to be: 'Here is your God.'

As feared, the return from the exile fell far short of the glowing picture painted here. Yet, all is not poetic imagery, for the restoration is a sign of salvation; it is, in its measure, a redemption, a new creation. And the message could sometimes be reinterpreted in moral terms: the highway to be made straight was one's own life; the Kingdom was to be prepared for by repentance.

**Paul’s letter to Titus Chapter 2: 11-14; 3: 4-7**

It is possible that this letter was written in Paul’s name and on his behalf. It is late enough for the office of Bishop (Episcopos) to have grown out of that of Elder (Presbyteros) (see Titus 1;7) though some regions were earlier than others in this development. (Episcopos was a foreman in secular use and was used by the Church for the man who had supervision over the Presbyteros. This word meant an ‘old man’ and therefore the head of a household and the normal president at the weekly Eucharist.)

V.11 echoes 1 Timothy 2:3-4— 'God our Saviour desires everyone to be saved.' It insists that Christians live 'in the present age' - in the real world. God's grace permeates the human life of the Christian. It enables us to abandon what we recognise as vice and to embrace virtue. We live in hope: the full revelation of our God and of our Saviour Jesus Christ.

V. 14 echoes Mark 10:45 -'The Son of Man also came not to be served but to serves and to give his life a ransom for many.' He was one who 'went about doing good.' He gave himself that his people might, also, do good deeds in his world.

**Gospel Luke 3:13-16.21-22**

This week we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus by his cousin John. The problem facing us lies in the fact that the word Baptism has multiple meanings. With such portmanteau words, we must be continually aware that we understand each other precisely, or face confusion and misunderstanding.

Firstly, Baptism was traditionally part of an admission ritual into the Jewish community. It represented the crossing of the Red Sea and the River Jordan by a later candidate following in the steps of the original company.

Secondly, John’s baptism was a symbolic washing away of sin and sign of repentance. (also true of the contemporary Essenes at Qumran who used it daily)

As he was regarded as sinless, Jesus’ Baptism by John was seen by Luke to share the sinners’ identity as he later continued to do, provoking much Pharisaic criticism. But Jesus also uses the word Baptism as a cryptic synonym for his death as in “I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am constrained until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50). (This link of Baptism with Death may even originate with the quotation from Isaiah which concludes the Gospel reading today)

Again, in the Gospel, we have John talking about the ‘one who is to come’ baptising with the Holy Spirit and Apostolic fire implying a higher order altogether. By saying this John was indicating that it would have the purifying effect of fire and would give entry to the company of the Messiah, by bestowing the new Spirit promised for the end-time.

But then, finally, as Luke’s readers would well know, Baptism was also the universal ceremony of admission of new converts to the Christian Church.

(To-day, confusion is compounded by the irregular use of ‘christening’ which is strictly only part of Baptism. The word is commonly used to mean the whole, when in fact it is correctly Chrismation or Anointing with Chrism within Baptism.)

In reading the Gospel, we must remember that we are not reading a dispassionate account. This is Luke’s view of John’s role and may not have been what John or his disciples would have said had they been asked.

Luke records the Baptist denying that he is the Messiah. True, he is not being as explicit as the author of the fourth Gospel who reported - 'He confessed, and did not deny it, but confessed, '1 am not the Messiah" (John 1:20) but the implied disavowal is obvious enough.

Luke tells us that Jesus joined the people who went to receive the baptism of John. He does not describe the baptism itself because the passage is more concerned in the divine revelation and in the coming of the Spirit.

His enemies constantly criticise Jesus for consorting with sinners (a.k.a. ordinary people?) This problem also concerned his supporters who were conscious of the problem of Jesus associating with the queues of sinners who approached John (see Matthew 3:14-15).

Luke shows that Jesus' Baptism was in keeping with his view of his mission. He had come to minister to sinners and although he may have been sinless he could still befriend them (see 2 Corinthians 5:21).

It is not surprising that Luke, with his interest in prayer, tells us that Jesus prayed at his baptism. Luke indeed gives the impression that it was in response to the prayer of Jesus that the Holy Spirit came upon him. And not impression only; it is Luke's intent that we should also see it. Later (11:13) we learn that similarly the heavenly Father gives the Holy Spirit to those who ask.

And Jesus' prayer was a plea to the Father that God would make himself known and declare their relationship. Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke with his 'in bodily form' emphasizes that the event was a public event and not something that Jesus alone was conscious of.

The figure of the dove at Jesus' baptism, likely, has reference to his mission. The dove was a symbol of the people of Israel (Psalm 74:19) and a message of hope (Genesis 8:8,12). Luke's baptism-story shows Jesus as a Spirit-filled Son and Servant, a messenger of God to his people.

Luke took Mark’s record as a starting point and then made little but significant alterations. We cannot be certain of his reasons for all the changes but it seems that for Mark, the Baptist had been the herald of the new age and thus the opening part of it.

But, by the time of Luke’s publication the Baptist’s followers had all but vanished from the earth and he had he had become a figure of the past. So Luke recasts him rather as the last hurrah of the old era which had passed into history. For Luke, the Christian Church was the people of the New Covenant. All three Synoptics would agree that there was a fault line between the old and the new orders, represented by the two figures of the baptiser and the one he baptised.

And in John, the fault line is marked by the water changing into wine, as we shall see in the Gospel reading for next Sunday.