**The Baptism of the Lord Year A**

**8th January 2023**

**First Reading Isaiah 42:1-4 & 6-7**

This is the first of the several magnificent songs by Second Isaiah about a Servant of Yahweh. In several places, the author describes the servant and the mission he is called by his Lord to accomplish. (Scholars are divided as to how many passages should be included in this group)

Later Servant Songs (49;1-6, 50;4-9) will fill in the picture with further details culminating in the final great hymn (52;13-53;12) in which the redemptive death of the servant is described and his ultimate vindication and triumph. Who the author actually had in mind is a hotly disputed question among Hebrew scholars, but very early on, Christians applied the figure to Jesus.

Relevant points in our passage speak of: the servant’s vocation to bring the knowledge of God to the Gentiles. His character will be one of meekness, patience and mercy with an unswerving loyalty to the mission. The mention of a 'covenant' suggests a new one to replace the old with examples of the sort of people who will benefit from this new order.

**Responsorial Psalm: 28:1-4, 9-10**

This psalm celebrates the kingship of Yahweh possibly at a royal coronation. The waters of lines 5, 6 and 11 refer to the waters above the firmament which also contained the sun, moon and stars.

It is thought that it originated in Canaanite culture, but if so, the hymn has been thoroughly reconditioned. In Jewish use, the storm has become an Epiphany of Yahweh, the Creator-God.

(Epiphany simply means a ‘revealing’ or ‘making known’ and can be used of many occasions.)

In Christian use "The voice of the Lord upon the waters" suggests a voice from heaven as at the Baptism of Jesus. So the psalm becomes a celebration of a divine Epiphany that takes place on this occasion.

**Second Reading Acts of the Apostles 10:34-38**

A significant milestone in Acts is the conversion of Cornelius - so important in fact that, like the conversion of Paul, Luke has narrated it three times (10:1-48; 11:1-18; 15:6-18). In to-day’s passage Peter summarises the essence of the Gospel as the earliest Christians had proclaimed it.

It is often held that there is a subtle difference between the message of Jesus and that of his disciples. Jesus preached the kingdom, but the Church preached Jesus! And, the Church proclaimed the story of Jesus as a series of acts of God.

It is God who preaches the good news of peace in Jesus Christ, God who anoints him, and God who is with him in the performance of his miracles. And, God has no favourites.

He would bring salvation to all people in Jesus Christ. The 'message' that spread throughout Judea' refers to the good news of 'peace through Jesus Christ' by the apostles, sent first to 'the people of Israel' but then soon to all.

Peter's vision (10:9-16) made him realize that Christianity was a religion for all people, not a preserve of Jews.

For today's feast the key detail in the reading is the mention of John’s baptism of Jesus which became his 'anointing with the Holy Spirit and with power.'

**Gospel Matthew 3:13-17**

The Greek word ‘baptism’ meant submersion and was used of drowned sailors. But it had several other associations, which are easily confused. Its cleansing properties meant that it was widely practised as a symbolic cleansing from sin. The Essenes of Qumran would be baptised each day before copying the Scriptures. Converts to Judaism would also be baptised but this was to symbolically re-enact the crossing of the Red Sea and the Jordan in the history of Judaism.

So Jews would be familiar with Baptism as an admission ritual and it was naturally adopted for membership of the Christian Church. But, it here acquired its most important overtone, which was of new birth. The breaking of waters was the sign that a birth was imminent and this became the principal association for Christians.

But, the Baptism of Jesus by John is something completely different to all the above. It is historically most reliable if only for the fact that his disciples were embarrassed by it. John’s Baptism was an unequivocal sign of forgiveness for sin yet from the beginning Jesus’ disciples promoted him as sinless. So in to-day’s reading John protests and Jesus’ explanation is hardly convincing.

As far as Matthew’s account of the Baptism of Jesus is concerned, the important aspect is the revelation of Jesus as Son of God rather than the Baptism as such.

Later on Jesus himself spoke of his Baptism as a sign of his Crucifixion. This detail is only found in Luke 12;50 but the idea was of fundamental importance. The reason is that because like Jesus’ Crucifixion and Resurrection, Baptism is sacramentally both death and life in the one event.

It is illustrated by the serpent which symbolised life and death. (John 3;14, Numbers 21;4-9) Crucifixion and Resurrection are like two sides of one coin. Neither is comprehensible without the other.

So in baptism, the catechumen dies and rises in the one ceremony and total immersion is essential to the symbolism. It is also true that the Sacrament assumes the catechumen to be an adult. Children are only baptised in the faith of their parents.

However, we should be aware that such analogies are the fruits of years of reflection by countless saints and theologians and the implications are not always appreciated by many who casually bring their offspring for ‘christening’ The connections may not even have been made by the earliest Christians themselves!!!!

Baptism symbolises the new life we have in Christ. But we must not fall into the trap of thinking that the spiritual life depends on the accurate performance of the ritual or that the ritual provides a Get Out Of Hell free card. As Jesus said, “God is able to raise disciples from stones if he so wishes” (Matthew 3;9)

It may be that in linking Baptism and Crucifixion, Jesus was simply drawing attention to the complete and whole-hearted commitment which is common to both as it was also to Matthew’s readers who faced potential torture for their faith.