



Baptism of the Lord

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

The reading from Isaiah comes from the Book of Consolation.

The first book, the Book of Judgement, reminds us of the need to be faithful to our calling and to our covenant-treaty with God. The second book, written at a later time, emphasises liberation and restoration.

At the beginning of this year, which has begun with so much sorrow and grief, we need to remind ourselves of the *comfort* of God.

The genealogy of the prophets which begins with Moses reaches a new age with John the Baptist. Matthew sees John as the great herald spoken of in Isaiah. The ministry of John and the meeting with Jesus proclaim that John and Jesus are linked. With them, the Christian proclamation begins.

The story of the baptism of Jesus is intriguing. Matthew's concern is to tell us that Jesus is the Son of God, so it seems a puzzle to have the *greater* presenting himself to the *lesser* for a baptism of repentance.

Jesus attempts to withhold baptism but Jesus insists. His argument cannot be overturned. We must do God's will.

After the Baptism the story says, Jesus emerged from water, the symbolism of birth is unmistakable, and the heavens opened to him. Jesus saw the Spirit of God hover dove-like over him. Jesus saw; in a moment of powerful grace Jesus is aware of God with him in the gentlest of experiences. Not thunder and lightning, but less than the breeze, a gentle movement of air.

The opening of the heavens clearly heralds a new period and a new mode in the communication between God and God's people.

This is my beloved Son, in whom I have found pleasure. This pronouncement is not a prediction but an identification. It is an epiphany moment, God shows forth his beloved. He is beloved from the beginning he did not become so at baptism.

The message of sonship is not for Jesus' sake but for his followers, and the Christian community. The identification uses the words from Isaiah 42:1. linking the person of Jesus to the servant songs from the Book of Consolation.

For Matthew Son of God has two main definitions. Jesus is Son of God, the one revealed by heaven, God with us. Jesus is Son of God, the obedient one. It is Jesus, humble and obedient that calls forth the response, my beloved.

Jesus' uniqueness comes, not from pre-existence, not from miraculous conception, neither of which are central to Matthew but from a special human quality perfect obedience.

The way of the Christian is now open. Jesus goes ahead as the righteous one. The way of the disciple is the way of concrete, earthly obedience.

This is indeed consolation. To be godly does not require anything beyond our capabilities. It requires the fidelity of love which is born out of being in tune with the vision of God for the universe. As Peter says, "Anyone of any nation who acts with justice and honesty is pleasing to God."

To return to Isaiah: the servant of the Lord will bring forth justice. This will be accomplished with great sensitivity; there will be no shouting in public places, no threats, no intimidation.

The God who takes us by the hand will show us how to be lovers of justice, how to bring light to the nations, how to bring freedom to anyone locked in life-denying darkness.

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