

First Impressions THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD (A)

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

By: Jude

Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

Matthew has ended his infancy narrative. On the feast of the Holy Family we heard that they left Egypt and settled in Galilee, in a town called Nazareth. Now, after John the Baptist's preaching (3:1-12), Jesus enters the scene. Matthew states it simply in the opening line of today's gospel, "Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him." Jesus is lining himself up with John who preached his coming. He is affirming John's baptism and submitting himself to God's will, "...it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Jesus will continue the mission God proclaimed through all the prophets and right up to John. Through Jesus, God has come close to God's people. God's kingdom is at hand. How was God's kingdom present to those at the Jordan that day and how is it present to us now?—through the person of Jesus Christ, who has fulfilled the hope of God's long-waiting people. He is the one John proclaimed was coming after him to baptize with "the Holy Spirit and fire" (2nd Sunday of Advent, Mt. 3: 1-12). After his baptism Jesus comes out of the water, the heavens open and he sees the Spirit descending like a dove on him—the Spirit God promised, through Isaiah, that would be given to God's chosen servant.

We are in a season of epiphanies, manifestations of Jesus' identity to the world. Last week the visitors from the East recognized Jesus and today Matthew tells us that the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus and a voice from heaven announces him as God's "beloved Son." If one were announced as God's beloved child what would one expect?—answers to all life's problems as they arose? Or, better still, no problems at all! Shouldn't God's "beloved" expect to get through life without pain and conflict? And when death did come, certainly a "beloved child" should have a swift, sure and easy passage out of this life into the arms of God.

After his baptism Jesus will be led by the Spirit to wrestle with Satan in the desert and there the temptations put to Jesus will be about expecting special treatment from God----"if you are the Son of God,"... why not receive privileged status and be spared life's pains and disappointments? But Jesus will reject these temptations to power, glory and a pain-free life. He will live our life as we must live it, trusting in the love and constancy of God, even amid life's pains and disappointments.

That is the message he will preach, after his baptism and desert temptations, as he calls his first disciples (4: 1-16) and travels through Galilee teaching, proclaiming the good news and curing people. The voice proclaimed that Jesus is God's "beloved Son" and we, gifted with faith, recognize him as that beloved Son of God who shares our life and shows us God's gracious face.

It is curious that Jesus urges John to baptize him in order, he says, "to fulfill all righteousness." God is planning to set humans right with God, to restore the relationship broken by our sin. Through Jesus, God will bring about "righteousness," but not only between God and us. God wants to make our relationships right with others as well. So, Jesus went forth preaching and healing after his baptism, reaching out to those who: asked for forgiveness, were in need of healing and hungered for God's Word.

Many of us don't like the sound of "righteousness." It feels too close to "self righteousness." It smacks of superiority and separation. Maybe we can take a lesson from prison lingo. I have heard inmates describe a guard, or even another inmate, as "righteous." It means they live up to their word and can be trusted to do the right thing. That's certainly not the full understanding of the biblical notion of "righteousness," but it gives us a clue of its positive implications. A righteous person lives a life that does not separate people or judge them, but draws them together in an atmosphere of acceptance and trust.

Jesus did "fulfill all righteousness." Therefore we don't have to make ourselves right with God; we don't have to spend our lifetime "paying God back" for our sins and making amends for our past; we don't have to grovel to get God on our side; we don't have to say endless prayers to convince some angry god to yield to our urgent needs. The voice affirming Jesus as God's "beloved son" was God's stamp of approval on Jesus. Hence forth, what he proclaimed in words and actions about God's love for us could be trusted. His message is that we don't have to make God love us. God already does. We don't have to push and shove to move God to our side. God is already standing with us. Jesus is proof-positive of where God is in our lives. Jesus, Matthew tells us, is Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus' life and death assure us that we don't have to earn God's righteousness, God has given it to us. Well then, what are we to do?

We could live out our right relationship with God by living "righteously" with others. God's plan, "to fulfill all righteousness," means that we are to set things right with one another through forgiveness, love and justice. We might: work to heal broken relationships; forgive others, as we have been forgiven; reach out to

strangers, as God has reached out to us; feed the hungry, as Jesus did, etc. From this point in the gospel Matthew will show how the beloved child of God reveals his relationship to God. Empowered by his Spirit, we can follow his example.

We can't do all this on our own, but we can through Jesus who, as John promised, baptized us with the same Spirit that descended on him. Isn't that our mission as Christians, "to fulfill all righteousness?" Enabled and directed by the Spirit we received at baptism, we strive to set things right in the world, especially for the defenseless, neglected and mistreated.

JUSTICE NOTES

"A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench..."
(Isaiah 42:1-4)

There must be a growing conviction that a fully human civilization shows respect and love for the elderly, so that despite their diminishing strength they feel a vital part of society.

If we stop to consider the current situation, we see that among some peoples old age is esteemed and valued, while among others this is much less the case, due to a mentality which gives priority to immediate human usefulness and productivity. Such an attitude frequently leads to contempt for the later years of life, while older people themselves are led to wonder whether their lives are still worthwhile.

It has come to the point where euthanasia is increasingly put forward as a solution for difficult situations. Unfortunately, in recent years the idea of euthanasia has lost for many people the sense of horror which it naturally awakens in those who have a sense of respect for life. Certainly it can happen that, when grave illness involves unbearable suffering, the sick are tempted to despair and their loved ones or those responsible for their care feel compelled by a misguided compassion to consider the solution of "an easy death" as something reasonable. Here it should be kept in mind that the moral law allows the rejection of "aggressive medical treatment" and makes obligatory only those forms of treatment which fall within the normal requirements of medical care, which in the case of terminal illness seeks primarily to alleviate pain. But euthanasia, understood as directly causing death, is another thing entirely. Regardless of intentions and circumstances, euthanasia is always an intrinsically evil act, a violation of God's law and an offence against the dignity of the human person.

There is an urgent need to recover a correct perspective on life as a whole. The correct perspective is that of eternity, for which life at every phase is a meaningful

preparation. Old age too has a proper role to play in this process of gradual maturing along the path to eternity. And this process of maturing cannot but benefit the larger society of which the elderly person is a part.

-----Excerpts from Pope John Paul II, “ Letter to the Elderly”, 1999)

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates’ names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or, whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina’s, “People of Faith Against the Death Penalty.” *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

John L. Conaway #0084604 (On death row since 10/19/92)

Nathan Bowie #0039561 (2/5/93)

William Bowie #0039569 (2/5/93)

--Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

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If you are a preacher, lead a Lectionary-based scripture group, or are a member of a liturgical team, these CDs will be helpful in your preparation process.

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You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use "First Impressions" in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find "Preachers' Exchange," which includes "First Impressions" and "Homilias Dominicales," as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. "Homilias Dominicales"-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP. Like "First Impressions", "Homilias Dominicales" are a preacher's early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive "Homilias Dominicales" drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA

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