

THE EMMAUS SERIES

2nd Sunday Year A

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; John 1:29-34

Look, there is the Lamb of God

The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan initiated the Saviour's public life. In the liturgies of each of the three yearly cycles (A, B and C), the readings from the synoptic gospels of that year give way to a reading from John's gospel – helping us to look back at the baptism of Jesus, as a mysterious anticipation of all that his life was to mean. This brief passage from John's gospel helps us to understand the nature of the faith-filled meditation that finds expression in the fourth gospel.

John's gospel does not mention the actual baptism of Jesus, though its reference to it is unmistakable. 'Behold the lamb of God' – this title of the Saviour is so familiar to us that it comes as a surprise to learn that it is only found in the New Testament writings associated with the community for which John's gospel was written. It is a title rich in implications. It calls to mind the Servant Song of Isaiah 53, in which God's Servant – the one who will bring healing to God's people by bearing their burdens – is compared to 'a lamb led to the slaughter house'. In telling the story of the Passion, John's gospel associates the death of Jesus with the slaughtering of the paschal lambs – a theme already anticipated by Paul: 'Christ our paschal lamb has been sacrificed' (1 Cor 5:7). It is through the Paschal Mystery that will end his life's journey that the Saviour will 'take away our sins', and lead creation into the eternal embrace of God.

This mystery, John foretells, will be a 'baptism with the Holy Spirit'. In the other gospels' accounts of Christ's baptism – as in Matthew's, read last Sunday – the Spirit's presence is described as momentary. John's account stresses the abiding presence of the 'Paraclete' of which so much will be said later in the gospel – as the principle of new life in Christ. Here John's original text uses a word with strong implications that is to appear often in what follows, frequently translated as 'abide': Jesus tells us, through the Apostle Philip, 'You must believe that I abide in the Father and the Father abides in me'; and in the allegory of the vine, he declares, 'Whoever abides in me bears much fruit'. The Spirit is manifested as 'abiding' permanently in the Saviour - one with him as Author of the blessings his incarnate presence among us will bring.

In the deceptively simple words of this gospel, the Baptist's witness takes us deep into the divine mystery of Jesus: 'he ranks before me because he existed before me'. The opening words of Paul's letter to the Corinthians make a similar confession, clearly affirming Jesus as 'Lord' – one with the Father in the divine name itself, and in the bestowing of 'grace and peace' upon the world.

John Thornhill sm