

THE EMMAUS SERIES

The Baptism of the Lord, Year C

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Acts 10:34-38

Luke 3:15-16, 21-23

The kindness and love of God our Saviour has been revealed

After his baptism by John in the Jordan, Jesus emerged from obscurity and began his public ministry. Recalling the humility of the Baptiser, - who declared himself unworthy to perform even the slave's act of loosening the straps of the messiah's sandals – Luke underlines how amazing is the event that is to take place, as Jesus submits himself to John's baptism of repentance. 'I baptize with water', John declares, 'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire' - Luke's narrative of the first Pentecost is clearly foreshadowed.

Believers of every generation have been puzzled by this unexpected turn of events. Seeking the reason why, takes us to the heart of God's plan of salvation. This plan, in the words of the Greek Fathers of the early Church, is an expression of the divine 'condescension' – God would open the way to eternal life for a lost world, not by a remote divine edict, but in a way that gives expression to the mystery of God's active love for the human family. The Father 'gave his only Son' (Jn 3:16); the Son 'emptied himself, taking the form of a slave' - he would give expression to God's compassion and generosity for a world that was lost, by taking upon himself the only way that can lead from our world's destructive darkness and selfishness, into the light and life for which we were made. By his sharing in that way he consecrates it; and in the Paschal Mystery its mysteriously foreshadowed he is to become our 'Way' (Jn 14:6).

Today's first reading is the opening passage of 'The Book of Consolation' of the Isaian writings. These writings had an encouraging message for God's people in their exile - a message that resonates with messianic expectations. Though all may seem to be lost, they must trust in the promises brought by their faith. Their returning to their homeland will be like a new Exodus, as the desert wilderness is transformed into a 'way for the Lord', the valleys are filled and the mountains laid low; 'the glory of the Lord' will lead the way, just as it did in the first Exodus (see Exodus 40:36). (It is not surprising that the New Testament writers associated this passage with the herald ministry of John the Baptiser.)

After foreshadowing how he will make himself the way forward for struggling humanity, Jesus gives himself to prayer, and the tangible presence of the Father and the Spirit point to the full implications of the saving mystery that is to come. There is a symmetry in the gospel story - if the Saviour's public life ends with the climax of the Paschal Mystery, it begins with a foreshadowing of this same mystery, as Jesus goes into the waters of the world's sinfulness and emerges into the glory of the Father's acceptance. Christian baptism has its meaning from both these events. As Paul writes, we 'were baptized into his death' that with him we might 'begin living a new life'. Today's reading from Paul's letter to Titus reminds us of the great benefits that are ours through baptism's 'cleansing water of rebirth', now that finally 'God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race'.

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