

THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD – A

This feast of the Baptism of the Lord brings to a conclusion the Church's celebration of Christmas. The feast is linked to the Epiphany because both feasts are epiphanies or manifestations. Christ was revealed to the wise men by a star, at the Baptism Christ is revealed by the voice from heaven, 'This is my Son, the Beloved.' In Matthew's account which we read this year John the Baptist knows that it is he who needs baptism not Jesus. The early Christians had difficulty in accepting that Jesus was baptised, how could Jesus submit to John? Matthew explains that it was necessary in order to fulfil God's saving justice, Jesus becomes part of the human race who are looking forward to the fulfilment of all God's promises. In the first reading we listen to the prophet Isaiah with the first of four 'servant songs.' In these songs the perfect servant of Yahweh preaches the true faith, expiates the people's sins by his own death and is glorified by God. In the second reading from Acts we have part of Peter's instruction speech to Cornelius and his household. God has no favourites and although God sent his word initially to the people of Israel yet now, through all Jesus did while on here earth, anyone who fears God is acceptable to him.

The **First Reading** comes from the prophet Isaiah. He was a major prophet in Israel but the book which bears his name is not all his work. The reading today comes from the second part of the book, chs.40-55 (Second Isaiah), the work of an unnamed writer, a disciple of Isaiah. This part of the book covers a period of Jewish history 200 years after Isaiah's day when Jerusalem has fallen and the nation is in exile in Babylon. Cyrus, the instrument of God, is about to come and overpower the Babylonian Empire and be the means by which the Israelites are able to return, a new Exodus. Embedded in the book are four passages called the 'Songs of the Servant of Yahweh.' They depict a perfect servant of God who is the light of the nations and gathers in God's people. He is one who preaches the true faith, who expiates people's sins by his own death and is glorified by God. This part of the book, in contrast with the first which is for the most part threatening, is far more consoling as the opening words announce, "Console my people, console them, says your God."

The reading, 42.1-4,6-7, is the first of the servant songs in second Isaiah. The servant is presented as a prophet judging the people fairly he has a mission in which he is assisted by the Spirit, a light to the nations he teaches discreetly and firmly. His mission transcends that of other prophets since he is himself both covenant and light and performs tasks of liberation and salvation. The Church clearly applies these words to the Christ.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Psalm 28.1-4,9-10, is a hymn to the Lord of the storm. This seems a strange psalm to reflect on the first reading where we read of the gentle justice of God. This is a reflection on God's glory and power and the 'sons of God' the people of Israel must adore and acknowledge God's glory and power. The second verse continues to speak of God's power and splendor and the final verse speaks of 'the Lord enthroned over the flood' perhaps a reference to the primeval chaos where Genesis speaks of the divine wind seeping over the waters, the first manifestation of divine justice.

The **Second Reading** is from Acts of the Apostles. This New Testament book is part two of a history of the rise of Christianity, the first part being the gospel according to Luke. They became separated when, about 150 A.D., Christians wanted the four gospel accounts bound together in one volume. The author, Luke, is a Syrian from Antioch, a doctor of non-Jewish origin, who was a close friend of Paul accompanying him on his second and third missionary journeys. Luke collected a great deal of evidence from a variety of sources which he edited. The book deals with the primitive Jerusalem community under Peter's leadership, the spread of Christianity to Samaria, to the gentile peoples and the early days of Christianity in Antioch. From chapter 13 Luke deals with Paul's three missionary journeys and ends with Paul a prisoner in Rome.

The reading, Acts 10.34-38, is part of a longer story beginning at verse 1 of Chapter 10 where Cornelius, a centurion, and his household are described as devout and God-fearing. He is visited by 'the angel of God,' who tells him to send for a man 'Simon, known as Peter.' Cornelius acted on the angel's command and sent for Peter who was lodging in Jaffa. Peter meanwhile had had a strange dream telling him to eat from the animals displayed in a sheet lowered from above. Peter says he will not eat 'anything profane or unclean.' The voice tells him he has no right to call profane what God has already made clean. The vision was repeated three times and while still trying to work out what it all meant the men sent by Cornelius arrived. Prompted by the Spirit Peter invited the men in and next day they set off to Caesarea where Cornelius awaited them. Peter entered and Cornelius told his story. Peter's visions now began to make sense and he addressed the household which is where our reading begins. The unclean animals in Peter's vision were the gentiles of Cornelius' household and he realizes anybody of any nationality is acceptable to God. We then have part of Peter's instruction and the passage concludes, 'while Peter was still speaking the Holy Spirit came down on all the listeners' and Peter knew they could not be denied baptism. There follows the baptism of Cornelius and all his household, the first gentile converts. (Read the whole of chapter 10 if you have time.) This reading links well with the gospel reading of Jesus' baptism.