

## THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD – B

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's identity is revealed by the presence of the Spirit and by the voice from heaven, 'This is my Son, the Beloved.' Mark's account of the baptism begins with John the Baptist revealing something of who Jesus is and the baptism he will bring. When Jesus appears we are told very little of his baptism and more of the revelation given as soon as Jesus emerges from the water. The first reading from the prophet Isaiah is imploring the Israelites, about to return from exile, to turn the 'Holy One of Israel' in all their needs. In the second reading St John tells us that faith in Jesus enables us to overcome the temptations of this world.

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), which deals with 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 part 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, 55.1-11, is the final invitation to the returning exiles. In verses 1-5 the prophet is encouraging the Israelites to participate in the benefits of the new covenant and in the remainder of the reading to be converted while there is still time. Although spoken of in terms of food the essence of the new covenant is seen clearly in the words: 'Pay attention, come to me; listen and you will live.' The 'everlasting covenant' which is also the new covenant (see Jeremiah 31.31-34) is a reminder of the promises made to king David by the prophet Nathan in 2 Sam 7, 'your throne will be for ever secure.' The Israelites must be converted 'and seek out Yahweh while he is still to be found....Let him turn back to Yahweh who will take pity on him, to our God, for he is rich in forgiveness' and abandon their way of serving God, 'for my thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not my ways.' The word of God coming through the mouth of the prophet is like a messenger who does not return until his mission is completed.

The **Responsorial Psalm**, Isaiah 12.2-6, is a psalm found in Isaiah as a conclusion to the Book of Immanuel. It is a thanksgiving hymn of someone in distress whom God has helped and rescued. The second part of the psalm extols God's glory.

The **Second Reading** is from the first letter of St John. There are three letters attributed to John the first being the most important, possibly written at the same time as the gospel. This letter was written to the Christian communities of Asia (Turkey) because they were suffering near disintegration due to some early heresies which were afflicting the Church. In the introduction the writer says he wants to share what he has 'seen and heard', his experiences, with his readers. He picks out three main points 1. To live in the light of Christ and he lists four conditions to live such a life. 2. To live as God's children with three conditions necessary, and 3. He speaks of the source of love and faith. Love is from God so we must love, and faith in Christ Jesus is necessary to overcome the world. The letter ends with two supplementary points.

The reading, 5.1-9, speaks of faith and love. John begins by pointing out that belief in Jesus makes one a child of God and by keeping God's commandments we show that we love him and our task is not burdensome because with faith we can overcome all the temptations of this world. John asks, 'Who can overcome the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?' Jesus shed water and blood when he died 'and it is the Spirit that bears witness for the Spirit is Truth.' Water and blood have flowed from the side of Christ and with the Spirit they converge to bear witness in favour of the mission of the Son who gives life. The water and blood are interpreted by many of the Fathers of the Church as symbols of baptism and the Eucharist and these two sacraments as signifying the Church which is born like a second Eve from the side of another Adam, Christ.

