

“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:

We are in the year of Matthew; it is his gospel we will be hearing these Sundays. Though the feast of the Baptism of the Lord occurs each liturgical year, this time Matthew provides the lens for us to meditate on the event. Mark, for example, describes Jesus as coming to John and then being baptized. But Matthew is more explicit: Jesus came to John with the expressed intention of being baptized. So, Jesus' baptism is integral to the plan Matthew has in this gospel: Jesus is God-with-us, very much a part of our lives and with sinners. We know the end of the story: his baptism is pointing Jesus towards another “baptism”--- his death on the cross. So, Jesus enters our lives, not as a distant, impartial observer, but as one of us, all the way up to being with us in the death we all must pass through.

Jesus entered the waters where his Jewish brothers and sisters had also gone to repent their sins. His brother and sister Jews, by being baptized, were also expressing their trust in God; that God would come soon to deliver them. Jesus is with his brothers and sisters who trusted that the God of Israel had not abandoned them and would act on their behalf to deliver them from sin and from the forces in the world that oppressed them. Others had not remained faithful, had given up hope that they would be delivered and had turned to the seeming more powerful gods of their pagan neighbors. There is much to draw us too away from faith during times of stressful waiting, filled with the allure of false promises and empty hopes.

Matthew doesn't focus on the baptism itself, rather he builds to the divine manifestation that follows, which announces Jesus as the Son of God. The voice speaks to John and perhaps to the others; it makes public who Jesus is. Jesus, the “beloved Son,” will offer his life in service for us and God is “well pleased”

with him. Thus, Jesus fulfills the prophetic role Isaiah describes; that of a humble and meek servant of God who is totally dedicated to God and the calling he has received. Jesus' public ministry as God's servant, begins and is empowered by God at his baptism.

Justice is mentioned twice in the first reading: the servant will set things right, God's laws will be observed, and people will live in right relationship to God, one another and all creation. Isaiah wrote for a people in exile. Certainly, they felt the injustice of their fate, the words about bringing forth justice and setting prisoners free would have come as comforting words in their slavery. So, when Jesus tells John to allow the baptism "...it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness," he is showing that he has been sent him to fulfill the longed-for justice of God. Jesus identifies with the servant in Isaiah and so will not accomplish justice by force, but gently, even inconspicuously, all the while tending to those who are like "a bruised reed....a smoldering wick...."

Calling Jesus, the Son of God recalls the Jewish hope in one who will be the ideal ruler over the people. But it also refers to the one who is God's obedient servant. The voice in Isaiah promises the giving of the Spirit to the servant. Matthew shows us today that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promise, and that he will be the messenger of God's love and the entrance of God's kingdom into our lives. While we have come to identify the dove as a symbol of God's Spirit, in the Hebrew texts, it is also a symbol of God's love. Hence the dove comes upon Jesus, the "beloved" Son who is the sign of God's love for us. I saw a prayer once that describes God as "a God of long-suffering love." That phrase speaks to me as I reflect on these readings. God's love for us is not an infatuation, nor is it a self-centered love that enjoys the feeling of being the object of love. Rather, God's love for us is prior to our love for God and despite the cost, God will make a great sacrifice for us in this love. God's is a "long-suffering love" for us.

John objects to baptizing Jesus and Jesus tells him, "Allow it now for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Now what could "fulfill all righteousness" mean? And what was there in that statement that convinced

John to go ahead and baptize Jesus? Look at the Isaiah reading. One interpretation of the identity of the servant is that Israel herself was to take on that role. The greatness of ancient Israel was its being chosen as God's servant people. But they, like us, tended to hear the news of being God's chosen as a privilege and so missed the part about being God's humble and obedient servants. Isaiah says the people were to be a shining light to the "nations" so as to draw the gentiles to God. Since they failed in their mission, the expectation for such a faithful servant shifted from the people to a messianic figure. Christians see Christ as the fulfillment of the texts and the one who embodies the corporate identity of the people ---as well as being the one sent TO them.

When Jesus enters the waters he will be identified with those John baptized, indeed with all of us who struggle against the many manifestations of sin in our lives and in our world. Sin has set us apart from God; Jesus enters our world to free us from its power and enable us to be "right" with God. He will "fulfill all righteousness." We cannot accomplish this on our own, but through Jesus, we are given the gift of righteousness, we are in a new relationship with God—this is the gospel message----Jesus enters our lives so that we can enter into a new life with God.

When Jesus leaves the waters God confirms his mission. The rest of the gospel shows us what shape the mission will take: he will raise the dead, forgive sinners, welcome the outsider, heal the broken and make us God's daughters and sons. His mission is the one Isaiah described for God's servant, "to open the eyes of the blind, to bring prisoners from confinement and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness. Because Jesus will be faithful to his Spirit-anointed mission, his path will lead to acceptance by those God-seekers he meets along the road. But his unswerving living out of his calling will also lead to rejection, suffering and death.

I guess Jesus could have been an innocent bystander to our lives. That would have been one way Emmanuel, God with us, could have been in our world. Had Jesus chosen that role, it would have begun here at John's baptismal waters. Jesus would have shown up on that day and been a warm, endearing

presence to those gathered at the waters' edge. He would have encouraged people to repent and accept John's baptism. After they were washed by John, Jesus would have congratulated them on their decision, handed them a fluffy towel to dry themselves and then extended an invitation to them to follow him—at a distance. His disengaged participation in our human experience was a choice Jesus could have made. If he had, he would not have been the promised "Emmanuel, God-with-us," but rather, "God-not-quite-with us." When God chose to enter our lives, God did not do it in half measures, but chose instead to go all the way and fully enter the waters with us.

If Jesus were going to fulfill his role as God's servant (only partially described in our first reading—see the other three Servant songs in Isaiah for a fuller picture: 49: 1-6; 50: 4-9; 52:13-53:12)), he could not remain aloof from our lives. He had to show us how far God and he were willing to go to be part of our lives so that Jesus could lead us to be part of God's life. This invitation to our full life with God and the way that made it possible, began after Jesus' baptism. His acceptance of John's baptism was a sign of the way he would draw us to himself; not as a sidelong savior, a cheerleader urging us to try harder. Rather, his full acceptance of our struggles and then death, revealed to us that he truly was one of us. From that position, he invited us to follow him and even die for him. His invitation is very appealing because of what he was willing to do for us.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER

The Center of Concern's best seller, **Catholic Social Teaching Our Best Kept Secret**, by Edward Deberri and James Hug, is now available in its 4th Edition, greatly revised and expanded. This popular resource presents outlines of the past century's major social and economic justice documents of the Church from Encyclicals to Councils, from regional Bishop statements to national conferences and includes outlines of 10 documents from 1995 to 2003.

The book is available from: Center of Concern, 1225 Otis St. NE,
Washington, D.C. 20017 USA.
phone: 202 635 2757 ext. 111 fax: 202 832 9494 Price: \$20.00

QUOTABLE

"I shall pass through this world but once. Any good, therefore, that I can do or any kindness that I can show to any human being, let me do it now. Let me not defer or neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

-----Gandhi

JUSTICE NOTES

Frequently when they attacked me for being involved in politics, I used to say, I wish I knew what Bible they were reading! Because the Bible I read was quite clear: God revealed God to the children of Israel, not in a sanctuary, but by carrying out a political act—freeing a bunch of slaves. Nothing could be more political. And yet it was also deeply religious. They then realized that the God who does this kind of thing must be a God who cares, who is biased in favor of the weak, the oppressed the marginalized. —Archbishop Desmond Tutu, quoted in, THE LIVING PULPIT, October-December 2004, page 47.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

“Can you imagine what it’s like to have your boy on death row? Can you imagine what it’s like to visit him there every Saturday and tell him, ‘I love you. I’ll see you next week,’ when you never know if they’re going to call and say, ‘He’s up next—it’s time for his execution.’”

----Jeanetter Johnson, Mother of Alan Gell, who was retried and found innocent because prosecutors withheld evidence that might have cleared him of first-degree murder.

[The News and Observer, February 15, 2004, Raleigh, NC]

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.” Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP
Please write to:.....

Danny Frogg #0137368 (On death row since 3/27/98)
Allen Holman #0587682 (4/7/97)
Clinton Smith #0507433 (4/13/98)
-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

1. CD Available: **“FIRST IMPRESSIONS: PREACHING REFLECTIONS ON LITURGICAL YEAR A.”** The CD contains two reflections for almost all the Sundays and major feasts of the year. In addition, there are helpful essays for preaching during the liturgical seasons (Advent, Lent, the Triduum, etc.), ten book reviews and essays on various aspects of preaching. The files are in three formats (Microsoft Word, WordPerfect and Adobe Acrobat Reader) so you should have no trouble opening them on your computer. To purchase go to: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> click on the “Year A–CD” button on the right and follow the instructions.
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 webpages: <http://www.preacherexchange.com> and <http://www.opsouth.org/> (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.

DONATIONS

If you would like to support this ministry, please send tax deductible contributions to Jude Siciliano, O.P., whose address is listed below. Make checks to: Dominican Friars of Raleigh. Or go to our webpage to make an online donation: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>
Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

Jude Siciliano, O.P., Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA
P.O. Box 12927, Raleigh, N.C. 27605, (919) 833-1893, Email: judeop@juno.com