

Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 55:1-11

Originally, this was a call to those exiled in Babylon to return to Jerusalem; but it is also a call that is made at all times, to everyone.²

Thus says the Lord:

¹All you who are thirsty, come to the water! Water was very precious in the arid lands where this text was composed. It is a symbol of abundance, fertility, and even life itself.⁴ You who have no money, come, receive grain and eat; come, without paying and without cost, Salvation is a wondrous gift from God that can never be bought. Israel must do her part and “come”; thus she exercises faith. By faith, however, one recognizes that all human effort simply conditions a person to receive God’s *free* gift which is presented as a banquet.¹ drink wine and milk!

²Why spend your money for what is not bread, your wages for what fails to satisfy? Heed me, and you shall eat well, All are invited to this banquet at the end of the world which is described here; all that is needed is a thirst for God and *obedience* to his call.³ you shall delight in rich fare. In the Eucharist, the banquet of the New Testament, the words of the prophet come true in the complete sense in the words spoken by our Lord when he instituted that sacrament: “Take and eat” the true bread of life, the very finest food, which money cannot buy.²

³Come to me heedfully, listen, that you may have life. We must *listen* because the source of life is to be found in God’s word.³ I will renew with you the everlasting covenant, the benefits assured to David. This can be read by Christians as an invitation to share in the new and eternal Covenant sealed with the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, a pledge of salvation for all mankind.²

⁴As I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander of nations,

⁵so shall you summon a nation you knew not, and nations that knew you not shall run to you, because of the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, who has glorified you.

⁶Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near. The Israelites are called to conversion. In order to return to their homeland, they must return to God, must “seek” him.²

⁷Let the scoundrel forsake his way, and the wicked man his thoughts; let him turn to the Lord for mercy; to our God, who is generous in forgiving. However, St. Augustine cautions: “It is true that God promises forgiveness for your conversion; but he does not promise tomorrow for your delays.”²

⁸For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. The great challenge to faith is to see the signs of God’s perfect love in a very imperfect world. It takes genuine, profound, and on-going conversion. It means acknowledging deep down that our ways are very different from God’s, and then converting our ways toward closer alignment with the divine: mercy more than justice, persons more than things, love more than security. In fervent prayer for such insight, we do not change God’s will, we change ourselves.⁴

⁹As high as the heavens are above the earth so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts. The Lord, who allows himself to be found and who does not judge in the way that men do, is willing and able to grant forgiveness.² God’s “ways” refers to external reform and his “thoughts” refers to interior renewal.¹

¹⁰For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to the one who sows and bread to the one who eats,

11so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; my word shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it. The word of God will not return to him empty and barren; rather, it will flourish in all things, nourished by the good deeds of those who obey and fulfill his teachings. The word is fulfilled when it is put into practice. If it is not put into practice, it remains barren and withered and starved. Listen carefully, then, when he tells of the food that nourishes him: *My food is to do the will of him who sent me.* (Jn 4:34)²

1 John 5:1-9

This beautiful letter was written by the Apostle John in his old age to his spiritual “children”, Christians who were not beginners but already mature in their faith. Like his Gospel, this letter is profound. Yet it is simple. It is deep, yet clear enough for a child to understand it.⁷ St. Jerome tells us that when John was a very old man his only message was “little children, love one another.” When his disciples asked him why he was always saying the same thing he always replied, “My children, this is what the Lord commands; if we do this, nothing else is necessary.” Our reading for today is a reaffirmation of love in action.⁵

The fifth chapter is a summary of the entire letter. In the opening verses St. John points to some consequences of faith: he who believes in Christ is a child of God (v.1); he loves God and men, his brothers (v.2); he keeps the commandments (v.3) and shares in Christ’s victory over the world (vv. 4-5).⁶

Our selection has three main themes: 1. faith in Jesus leads us to love one another, which we do by keeping the commandments of God; 2. faith in Jesus gives us the ability to overcome the hostile forces of “the world”; and 3. Jesus’ baptism and death witness to his identity.¹⁰

Beloved:

1Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is begotten by God, and everyone who loves the Father loves also the one begotten by him. It is axiomatic that one who loves his father also loves his brothers and sisters, because they share the same parent.⁶ There was this great fact which is the basis of all of John’s thinking, the fact that love of God and love of man are inseparable parts of the same experience.⁸

2In this way we know that we love the children of God The author speaks of “children of God” rather than “the brethren” in order to stress that this love is a dimension of the love of God.⁹ when we love God and obey his commandments.

3For the love of God is this, that we keep his commandments. This comes from another idea that is central to John’s thinking: *Obedience is the only proof of love.*⁸ And his commandments are not burdensome. It is the way of God never to lay a commandment on any man without also giving him the strength to carry it out. Besides, his commandments are not a burden, they are a privilege; for to carry them is an opportunity to show our love.⁸

4for whoever is begotten by God conquers the world. In this passage the word “world” means everything opposed to the redemptive work of Christ and the salvation of man that flows from it.⁶ And the victory that conquers the world is our faith. That which enables us to conquer the world is faith. It is the belief that Jesus is the Son of God. ⁸ The acceptance of Jesus in his true character is the source of the Christian’s power.⁹

5Who indeed is the victor over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

6This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and blood. The immersion of Jesus in water symbolized his death and resurrection. Jesus also died a real death on the execution-stake; otherwise he would not have atoned for our sin. The blood, which is shorthand for Jesus’ death, witnesses that he is the Son of God.⁵ Another interpretation

understands water and blood as symbols of the sacraments where the water would refer to Baptism where we receive the Holy Spirit and the life of grace and the blood would apply to the Eucharist, where we partake of the blood of Christ in order to have life in us. Jesus came on earth to give his life for men; we obtain that life in the first instance by means of the living water of Baptism and also by the application of the blood of Christ, which cleanses us from all sin.⁶ **The Spirit is the one who testifies, and the Spirit is truth.** The Spirit was present at Jesus' baptism according to John 1:32-34: "John gave this testimony also: 'I saw the Spirit descend like a dove from the sky, and it came to rest on him. But I did not recognize him. The one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'When you see the Spirit descend and rest on someone, it is he who is to baptize with the Holy Spirit.' Now I have seen for myself and have testified, 'This is God's chosen One.'"

7So there are three that testify, In Jesus' baptism we see two of these: the water of the Jordan river and the hovering Spirit accompanied by the voice revealing to the Baptist that this truly is the Son of God. Only later will we see the third witness—blood—in Jesus' suffering and death.⁴

8the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and the three are of one accord. According to the legal prescriptions of the Old Testament, the testimony of one witness was insufficient at trials. St. John points to three witnesses (the Holy Spirit, water and blood). He is saying that the water and the blood, that is, Christ's baptism and his death on the Cross, are a manifestation of his divinity. Clearly the word "witness" is used here in a broad sense: namely, in the sense that at those two important moments in his life, Christ makes known to us that he is true God.⁶

9If we accept human testimony, the testimony of God is surely greater. Now the testimony of God is this, that he has testified on behalf of his Son.

Mark 1:7-11

Jesus identifies Himself with sinful humanity by undergoing John's purification rite of baptism. Those who receive the baptism of Christ need not seek the baptism of John. Those who received the baptism of John did indeed seek the baptism of Christ. No baptism was necessary for Christ, but he freely received the baptism of a servant (John) to draw us toward his baptism.⁵

7This is what John the Baptist proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. This was the work of a slave and the thong of the sandal counted the least of all. John seems to be saying, "I am not worthy to be ranked as among Christ's servants, no, not even the lowest of his servants, nor to receive the least honored portion of his ministry."³

8I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." According to St. Thomas Aquinas, "Baptizing with the Holy Spirit" refers to the Baptism Jesus will institute and shows how it differs from the baptism of John. In John's baptism grace was only symbolized. By the baptism of the New Law men are baptized inwardly by the Holy Spirit and this is accomplished by God alone. In the baptism of John the body alone was cleansed by the water.¹¹

9It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee Except for his birth at Bethlehem and the time he was in Egypt, our Lord's hidden life took place in Nazareth and he came from there to receive John's baptism.¹² **and was baptized in the Jordan by John.**

10On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, The visible presence of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove marks the beginning of Christ's public ministry. Its presence symbolizes the peace and reconciliation that Christ will bring.¹² **descending upon him.** The Holy Spirit dwells in Jesus but not from the moment of his Baptism, but from the moment he became man. Jesus did not become God's son at his baptism; he is the Son of God from

all eternity. Nor did he become the Messiah at this point; he was the Messiah from the moment he became man. Baptism is the public manifestation of Jesus as Son of God and as Messiah, ratified by the presence of the Blessed Trinity.¹¹

11And a voice came from the heavens, “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” The voice of the Father, the Baptism of the Son, and the descent of the Spirit mark this episode as a revelation of the Blessed Trinity.¹¹

In the Luminous Mysteries, which are to be said on Thursdays, THE BAPTISM OF CHRIST IN THE JORDAN is the first of the new mysteries “of light.” In his Apostolic Letter, which was issued on October 16 of 2002, Pope John Paul II encourages us to meditate on these particularly significant moments in the public ministry of Jesus.¹⁵

Some of the material for this commentary is taken from: (1) “The Book Of Isaiah Chapters 40-66” by Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., (2) “The Navarre Bible: Major Prophets”, (3) The St. Paul Center For Biblical Theology Online Founded by Dr. Scott Hahn, (4) “The Workbook for lectors and gospel readers 2003” by Aelred R. Rosser, (5) “Jewish New Testament Commentary” by David H. Stern, (6) “The Navarre Bible: Catholic Epistles”, (7) “You Can Understand The Bible” by Peter Kreeft, (8) “The Letters Of John And Jude” by William Barclay, (9) “The Jerome Biblical Commentary, (10) “The Workbook for lectors and gospel readers 1997” by Lawrence E. Mick, (11) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of Mark,” (12) “The Navarre Bible: ST MARK”, and (15) the Apostolic Letter: “Rosarium Virginis Mariae.”

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.