

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

cf. John 1:29

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

John saw Jesus approaching him, and said:
Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the
sin of the world.

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

or:

cf. Mark 9:7

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

The heavens were opened and the voice of the
Father thundered:

This is my beloved Son, listen to him.

R⁷. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel

Mark 1:7-11; L21B

**This 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.**

**I have baptized you with water;
he will baptize you with the Holy
Spirit.”**

**It happened in those days that Jesus
came from Nazareth of Galilee
and was baptized in the Jordan by
John.**

**On coming up out of the water he saw
the heavens being torn open
and the Spirit, like a dove,
descending upon him.**

**And a voice came from the heavens,
“You are my beloved Son; with you I
am well pleased.”**

Reflecting on the Gospel

John the Baptist is part of the stirring excitement of a new beginning of the Good News that Mark announces in the first verse of his gospel. He is the precursor, the one going before Jesus to prepare his way.

Mark describes Jesus's arrival from the humble and unimportant village of Nazareth, in Galilee, in case anyone doesn't know it. Although he is without sin (cf. 2 Cor 5:21), Jesus puts himself in solidarity with the crowd and with sinful humanity. He bares his human body and at this, his first public appearance, chooses to go down into the waters of the Jordan to be baptized by John as a representative of our collective guilt. As he rises up, the heavens are

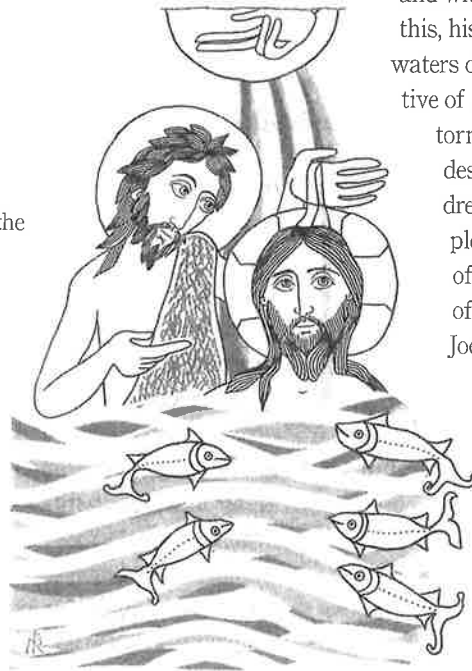
torn open, and the action of God is manifested in the descent of the Spirit “like a dove” and the voice addresses Jesus as “my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” In the person of Jesus, this is the beginning of a new age, a new relationship of earth and heaven, of the whole of creation and our human condition. As Joel Marcus comments: “God has ripped the heavens apart irrevocably at Jesus' baptism, never to shut them again. Through this gracious gash in the

universe, he has poured forth his Spirit into the earthly realm” (*Mark 1-8*, The Anchor Bible 27). Here is the answer to the cry of the exiles to God: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down” (Isa 64:1)! But there is no mountain quaking, no violent cosmic disturbances in this rending; it is a “gracious gash.” The

symbolism of “like a dove” is perhaps a memory of the spirit/wind of God that brooded birdlike over the face of the primeval waters at the first creation (Gen 1:2). It is also a witness to the gentle action of God that descends upon Jesus to empower him, like the prophets, with gentle service of the poor (e.g., Isa 42:1-5; 61:1) and our humanity that is impoverished by our sinfulness.

The word spoken by the Father at the baptism of Jesus is addressed to Jesus, not the Baptist or the crowd. The voice of God affirms Jesus as “my Son,” with memories of Psalm 2:7, a royal coronation psalm, and then as “the Beloved” upon whom God's favor rests. In the humble setting of the Jordan River, a humble man from a humble Galilean village is baptized by the humble precursor and proclaimed by God as one with royal dignity. Three times in the testing of faith at Mount Moriah, Abraham refers to Isaac as his “beloved son” as Isaac and he face the sacrificial knife out of obedience to God (Gen 22:2, 12, 16, LXX). The cost of Jesus's allegiance to his Father as yet hovers only as gently as a dove; in the not-too-distant future it is the carrion crow of death that will descend upon Jesus before he is unbound in the resurrection because of his obedient love of his Father.

This gospel is a declaration of who Jesus is to Mark's church, a statement of their self-understanding as disciples of the new messianic times who are sons and daughters of the Father because they are baptized into the Spirit-filled and Beloved Son, and commissioned to serve in his name. Throughout Mark's gospel, those who follow Jesus will struggle to understand and accept the implications of accepting one who is Son and Beloved, to understand what is revealed



to Jesus as he rises from the waters: that humanity, despite its sinfulness, is loved with the prodigal love of God. The first human being in this gospel who professes faith in Jesus as the Son of God and recognizes the heavens torn open in the torn body of the crucified One is the Gentile centurion. We are caught up in this same struggle of faith. Baptism demanded everything of Jesus—as it does of us.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

To the point: At the time of John the Baptist, baptism was performed as a ritual of cleansing and repentance. The one who entered into the waters was publicly proclaiming his or her sin and the desire to be washed clean of its effects. In today’s gospel, John identifies the difference between the baptism he performs and the one that will be offered by Jesus. In Jesus, there is not only the cleansing from sin but also newness of life. In our Christian baptism, we enter into the death and resurrection of Jesus and through the power of the Holy Spirit become a new creation in Christ.

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: Today’s first reading contains the first of four “Servant Songs” found in the book of the prophet Isaiah. While the other three servant songs are often interpreted as referring to an individual, this one seems to have been alluding to the entire people of Israel. One reason for this interpretation is that in the previous chapter, God addresses his people as “[Y]ou, Israel, my servant” (41:8; NABRE). When we, as Christians, read this hymn to a servant of God who will be “a light for the nations, / to open the eyes of the blind, / to bring prisoners out of confinement,” we immediately think of Jesus, who has been revealed to us as the light of the world and did indeed open the eyes of the blind and proclaim liberty to captives. As the Body of Christ in the world, we might be served by considering these words as not only proclaiming a truth about who Jesus is but also a truth about who we are called to be.

to experience: Take a moment to consider the first reading as directed toward you as an individual and then directed toward your parish community. How have you and your community been able to fulfill these words so far in your journey of faith? How might God be inviting you to embody them more fully?

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: When Jesus comes out of the waters, he witnesses “the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him.” In the dove we find a symbol of peace, hearkening back to the dove who brought Noah an olive branch to signal the end of the great flood and a new covenant between God and humans. In this covenant, God promised to never again “strike down every living being, as I have done” (Genesis 8:21; NABRE). At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus receives an affirmation of his identity as God’s beloved Son who is anointed to bring God’s spirit of peace and love to all people. Today’s psalm once again proclaims God’s deep desire to “bless his people with peace.”

to psalmist preparation: Where in your life are you in need of the peace of God, which casts out all anxieties, doubts, and fears?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

Today’s feast calls to mind the day of our own baptism. What do you remember or what stories have you heard about the day you were baptized?

In the first reading the servant of the Lord is described as one who will “bring out prisoners from confinement.” Where in your life are you in need of Jesus’s freeing touch?

In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter tells the gathered community, “God shows no partiality.” In your family, faith community, or city do you see some individuals or groups receive particular acclaim or censure due to their race, gender, or religious creed? How can you challenge these biases when you encounter them?

John the Baptist proclaims that Jesus will baptize “with the Holy Spirit.” What does this mean to you? How have you experienced the actions of the Holy Spirit most recently in your life?