

SPIRITUALITY

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

Isa 61:1 (cited in Luke 4:18)

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring glad tidings to the poor.

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Gospel John 1:6-8, 19-28; L8B

A man named John was sent from God.
He came for testimony, to testify to the
light,
so that all might believe through him.
He was not the light,
but came to testify to the light.

And this is the testimony of John.
When the Jews from Jerusalem sent priests
and Levites to him
to ask him, "Who are you?"
he admitted and did not deny it,
but admitted, "I am not the Christ."

So they asked him,
"What are you then? Are you Elijah?"

And he said, "I am not."

"Are you the Prophet?"

He answered, "No."

So they said to him,

"Who are you, so we can give an answer
to those who sent us?"

What do you have to say for yourself?"

He said:

"I am the voice of one crying out in the
desert,

'make straight the way of the Lord,'

as Isaiah the prophet said."

Some Pharisees were also sent.

They asked him,

"Why then do you baptize
if you are not the Christ or Elijah or the
Prophet?"

John answered them,

"I baptize with water;
but there is one among you whom you do
not recognize,
the one who is coming after me,
whose sandal strap I am not worthy to
untie."

This happened in Bethany across the Jordan,
where John was baptizing.

Reflecting on the Gospel

Christians read the Old Testament today, understandably, in light of Christ's fulfillment of the promises and prophecies found there. It is a simple thing to do, since the early church read the Old Testament in the context of Jesus's incarnation and teaching and the experience of Easter, and then formalized these readings and understandings in the texts of the New Testament.

But what if you were a Jew in the first century, eagerly hoping for the Messiah, a successor to David? These hopes, shared with the whole nation, had been growing since the return from Babylonian exile. As you searched through the panoply of prophecies, you began to wonder, when will these hopes be fulfilled? Who do you look for and where do you start looking? It would be like reading a mystery novel, knowing every clue, studying every sign, but seeing only in retrospect how the whole fits together.



Isaiah 61, for instance, is most often dated to the period just after the return from Babylonian exile, and the author of the passage is generally considered to be the speaker in the text. This prophetic passage emerged, therefore, some five centuries before the birth of Christ. In it the speaker says, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, / because the LORD has anointed me; / he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, / to heal the brokenhearted, / to proclaim liberty to the captives / and release to the prisoners." In its original historical context and literal meaning, the author speaks of the conditions that the returning Babylonian exiles found, especially when he promises that those returning exiles "shall rebuild the ancient ruins, / the former wastes they shall raise up / And restore the desolate cities, / devastations of generation upon generation" (v. 4; NABRE). It also seems that the postexilic prophet is speaking of his own role in the restoration of Jerusalem when he says, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me."

Yet there is also an eschatological edge to the hopes imagined, especially in the proclamation of "a year of favor from the LORD," an event still to come.

Christians see the spiritual fulfillment of these proclamations in the person and ministry of Jesus, centuries after they were uttered. The reason is simple: Jesus himself read this passage, according to Luke 4, in the synagogue in Nazareth.

There Jesus says of the Isaian passage, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21; NABRE). This we might identify with what Catholic biblical scholarship has called the *sensus plenior*, or "fuller sense," since it does not obviate the original historical meaning and context but points to a fulfillment of which the original human author was unaware.

This is why the questioning of John the Baptist in today's gospel reading by some representatives of the Pharisees makes historical and theological sense. The Pharisees, like most Jews of this period, were awaiting the Messiah. Because of the attractiveness of John's prophetic message of repentance to the people, and his popularity, he was someone who had to be examined. They asked, "Who are you?" In response, John confesses that he is not the Messiah, not Elijah, not the prophet and cites Isaiah 40:3, a passage dated to the end of the Babylonian exile: "I am the voice of one crying out in the desert, / 'make

straight the way of the Lord.” John identifies himself not as the Messiah, but as the fulfillment of long-ago prophecies, as the one who prepares the way for the coming Messiah.

But the questions still remained, even for John. Who ever thought that it would happen through a young, unmarried woman, that God would look with favor “upon his lowly servant,” Mary? God asks that as we wait for fulfillment, we be prepared for God to do new things, unexpected things, and be ready for the unlikeliest of answers.

Focusing the Gospel

Key words and phrases: “[T]here is one among you whom you do not recognize.”

To the point: Again, in today’s gospel, we hear the preaching of John the Baptist, this time from John’s gospel. When the priests and Levites question John about his identity, he points instead to one who is coming after him, one whom they “do not recognize.” As mysterious as these words must have been for the people who first heard them, they also hold a mystery for us. Near the end of Matthew’s gospel, Jesus offers a parable about the end of time when he will confront his followers, telling them, “[W]hat you did not do for one of these least ones, you did not do for me” (25:45; NABRE). How is Christ in our midst, right here, right now, and we do not recognize him?

Connecting the Gospel

to the first reading: In John the Baptist we find the ultimate prophet. He points to Jesus in all that he does. The first reading from Isaiah describes what a prophet truly is: one who has been anointed by God to proclaim “glad tidings to the poor,” healing to the brokenhearted, and freedom to those imprisoned.

to experience: In baptism we have each been anointed as “priest, prophet, and king.” The mantle of proclaiming “glad tidings” to those beaten down by life has been passed to us. How do the words you speak and the life you lead bring the good news of Jesus to others?

Connecting the Responsorial Psalm

to the readings: For Gaudete (Latin for “Rejoice”) Sunday, our “psalm” comes from Mary’s own song of praise to her Creator, the *Magnificat*. In the first reading, the responsorial psalm, and the second reading we find today’s theme of joy expounded upon. The prophet Isaiah proclaims, “I rejoice heartily in the Lord, / in my God is the joy of my soul.” Mary responds to Elizabeth’s claim that Mary herself is “blessed” by singing out the source of all blessing: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord; / my spirit rejoices in God my savior.” And St. Paul exhorts the Thessalonians to “[r]ejoice always.” Our readings leave no doubt that joy is a central part of any Christian’s life and not an optional attitude to be adopted only when we are naturally inclined to happiness.

to psalmist preparation: As you prepare to lead the assembly in praying Mary’s treasured words, pause to consider the place of joy in your own faith journey. How do you strive to embody this joy in your ministry and in your daily life?

PROMPTS FOR FAITH-SHARING

The prophet Isaiah proclaims, “I rejoice heartily in the Lord.” How do you experience God as “the joy of [your] soul”?

Isaiah prophesies that just as “the earth brings forth its plants,” God will “make justice and praise / spring up before all nations.” Where do you see justice and peace growing in the world?

In his letter to the Thessalonians, St. Paul writes, “[T]he one who calls you is faithful.” When was a time in your life that you experienced deeply the faithfulness of God?

In the gospel, John the Baptist is described as one who came to “testify to the light.” How does the way you live your life testify to the light of Christ?