

Personal Notes

050109 Sunday after January 6: The Baptism of the Lord (First Sunday in Ordinary Time) 21A

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In 2003, these Personal Notes for the Baptism of Jesus focused on the vocation of Jesus as applied to the Faithful. 2004 focused on the need to prioritize truth over politics in that vocation. I am willing and able to send these prior Notes from 2003 and 2004 to anyone requesting them. This offer will soon be relegated to the Appendix. The gist of the readings for the Baptism of Jesus is that God gives humans minds and vocations to use.

Different from 2003 and 2004, 2005 has a dual vocational focus, first openness to new ways of understanding, as new insights appear, second courage to proceed when one does not understand. Saint John the Baptist¹ had that courage when he baptized Jesus, a courage also required of the Faithful as they confront and vote on such issues as stem cell research and the astronomical discoveries of the Hubble Telescope.

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Isaiah 42 begins Second Isaiah, written in exile. The first four verses portray the Messiah as a servant of God. The Gospel of Matthew explains that this servant of God, in the person of Jesus, is God.²

The Lectionary draws attention to Isaiah 42:1, *my chosen one with whom I am pleased* and Matthew *my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*. Isaiah is less than keen about extending the covenant to the Gentiles, even as he writes about a *light for the nations* (Isaiah 42:6). Matthew is more accepting of the Gentiles, even though Matthew is probably writing for educated, nearby Jews. These Jews were familiar with the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac.

The *beloved son* is an essential background reference to Isaac, the son whom Abraham was prepared to sacrifice. God the Father sacrifices Jesus in a manner parallel to Isaac. The Faithful, too, participate, in making their God their most precious possession, no matter the cost. The potential sacrifice of Isaac serves as background for the voices from heaven, both at the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus.³

¹ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, "Israel Standing with Israel: The Baptism of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 3:13-17)," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 3 (July 2002) 520.

² Jeffrey A. Gibbs, "Israel Standing with Israel: The Baptism of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 3:13-17)," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 3 (July 2002) 511-526.

³ Robert J. Daly, S.J., "The Soteriological Significance of the Sacrifice of Isaac," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 39, No. 1 (January 1977) 69.

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Second Isaiah in the person of the prophet, demonstrates new insight, when, from exile, he portrays the Messiah as *not crying out, not shouting* (Isaiah 42:2). The Jews wanted a Messiah to bring them out of exile; they certainly were in no mood to expect the Gentile, Cyrus, acting in the name of God to set them free. Cyrus enabling the Jews to return to Jerusalem made the point that the courage of Isaiah proclaiming his new insights was true to his vocation.⁴

Isaiah 42:1-4 enriches what will become the third beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." The Messiah, then, has a law-observant and non-violent vocation. Well, maybe. Perhaps current versions of pacifism overly influence such an understanding.⁵ Pay, pray, and obey Christianity may also overly influence such an understanding. In any event, contemplating the Beatitudes with the Baptism of Jesus helps understanding the vocation of Jesus and his Faithful followers.

The Isaian promise of the Messiah contains a utility for learning about God. The notion of meekness is useful for teaching. Jesus says, "Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart." Jesus means he will not hurt the learner. Jesus is the promised Messiah.

Isaiah 42:6-7 pertain to the priestly vocation commission in Acts 26:18. The priest is called both to be righteousness and to teach about righteousness. The priest becomes a covenant between God and the Faithful. The priest is a light to the Gentiles.⁶ The first priest is Jesus, which the priesthood of Holy Orders and of the Faithful follow. The priesthood of the Faithful is particularly seen in nuns, such as the Poor Clares. The Notes refer to the Poor Clare nuns not to disparage any other apostolate, but because of my peculiar, particular, personal proclivities.

Isaiah 42:7 about bringing out *from the dungeon, those who live in darkness* is about Poor Clare light, shining from Mount Saint Francis in New Kent County, Virginia. Darkness signifies satanic authority that the nuns utterly defy in their contemplative

⁴ Richard J. Clifford, S.J., "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah and Its Cosmogonic Language," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 55, No. 1 (January 1993) 15.

⁵ Benedict T. Viviano, O.P., review of Michel Talbot, Heureux les doux, car ils hériteront la terre (Mt 5:4 [5]) in the Catholic Biblical Quarterly Vol. 66, No. 3 (October 2004) 669-700.

⁶ Susan R. Garrett, "Exodus from Bondage: Luke 9:31 and Acts 12:1-24," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 52, No. 4 (October 1990) 662.

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lives. Liberation from Satan brings the joy of soul expressed by the Responsorial antiphon for Psalm 27:11b, *The Lord will bless his people with peace.*⁷

Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 9-10

The Lectionary only uses Psalm 29, one of the ancient enthronement psalms,⁸ here. Cycle B for the Baptism of Jesus uses Isaiah 12:2-3, 43b c d, 5-6 rather than any psalm at all. Cycle C uses Psalm 104, both here and at Easter and Pentecost. Notes only began part way though Cycle A at Pentecost, May 19, 2002 and then proceeded to Cycles B and C. That means, from here until Pentecost, these Notes develop from Cycles B to C to A.

Psalm 29 promises peace to the Faithful from God, whose very throne rests “upon the subdued waters of chaos.”⁹ Peace is an attribute of whoever may be in charge. The irony is that when the Faithful give themselves to their God, their God gives them charge of themselves. Divine peace enables the Faithful to exhibit courage in the face of new insights, for example with the insight that the ordinaries in charge of their dioceses colluded with sexual misconduct by cover up.

Are any ordinaries exculpated from the cover-up? I do not pretend to know. I do know it is the Faithful, not the ordinaries, crying to heaven for justice in this matter. That knowledge grieves my heart.

Just before Psalm 29:9c, the Lectionary draws attention that *The God of glory thunders* in parallel with Matthew 3:17, *a voice of heaven came from the heavens*. Third Isaiah begins to change the meaning of Jerusalem and Zion to the hearts of the Faithful, the place of the Messianic Kingdom of God. The covenant gives courage in the face of new insights. I find that the voice of God does not so much *thunder* (with Isaiah) as *come* (with Matthew and Mark) into my heart.

Acts 10:34-38

Peter reluctantly extends the Kingdom of God to the Gentiles in the person of Cornelius. With Peter, the Exodus becomes an event not only for the Jews but also

⁷ Susan R. Garrett, “Exodus from Bondage: Luke 9:31 and Acts 12:1-24,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 52, No. 4 (October 1990) 671.

⁸ J. J. M. Roberts, “The Enthronement of Yhwh and David: The Abiding Theological Significance of the Kingship Language of the Psalms,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 4 (October 2002) 677.

⁹ J. J. M. Roberts, “The Enthronement of Yhwh and David: The Abiding Theological Significance of the Kingship Language of the Psalms,” the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 4 (October 2002) 680.

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for Christians. In Matthew 3:13 Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized. In Acts 10:37, Jesus began his public ministry in Galilee after his baptism. According to Saint Gregory the Great (540-603) one of the Four Great Western Fathers of the Church, whom Saint Thomas Aquinas cites,¹⁰ *Galilee* means *passing-over*.¹¹ Jesus shows the Faithful that they, too, can bring new light into the world with their insights passing over from sin to grace.

Acts 10:35, anointing *with the Holy Spirit and power* also applies to the Faithful as they cut their own ways through the morass of evil with which they must contend. In Luke's Acts, the miracles of Jesus result from the power of the Holy Spirit. Matthew gives Jesus the Messiah credit directly for his miracles.¹²

Jesus is more in charge of his own destiny in Matthew, the Gospel for Cycle A. The Gospel of Matthew has special pertinence in this age of deceitful shepherds, permitting exploitation of the Faithful by predatory priests. The Gospel of Matthew thematically portrays Jesus in conflict with the established religious authorities.¹³

Cf. Mark 9:7

The Lectionary uses *thundered*, though the reference to Mark only has *came*, as does Matthew. The Lectionary uses Mark 9:7, the Second Sunday of Lent, Cycle B. But how does God speak to the Faithful, through thunder or a gentle breeze? I think the gentle breeze has the greater impact. For example, the relatively loud enthusiasm of the annual charismatic Mass at my Our Lady of Mount Carmel parish in Newport News, Virginia, I find distracting, calling my attention to the enthusiasts rather than the voice of our common God. I think that may be why the Faithful never

¹⁰ Gregory, "Exposition from the Catena Aurea" in The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: Volume Two: From the First Sunday in Lent to the Sunday after the Ascension, tr. and ed. M. F. Toal, D.D. (P.O. Box 612, Swedesboro, NJ 08085: Preservation Press, 1996) 217.

¹¹ St. Gregory the Great, Pope and Doctor, "Given to the People in the Basilica of the Blessed Virgin Mary, on the Holy Day of the Resurrection: The Mystery of the Resurrection," in The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: Volume Two: From the First Sunday in Lent to the Sunday after the Ascension, tr. and ed. M. F. Toal, D.D. (P.O. Box 612, Swedesboro, NJ 08085: Preservation Press, 1996) 243.

¹² Jack Dean Kingsbury, "Observations on the 'Miracle Chapters' of Mathew 8-9," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 40, No. 4 (October 1978) 563.

¹³ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, "Israel Standing with Israel: The Baptism of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 3:13-17)," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 3 (July 2002) 518

hear shouting and wailing at the Poor Clare monastery in New Kent County, but rather the soothing calm of Gregorian Chant.

Matthew 3:13-17

The Gospel of Matthew begins by establishing that Jesus is the Messiah as the Son of God,¹⁴ then, the embodiment of Israel, the People of God. Jesus finally goes out to combat Satan, succeeding where Israel failed. Such is the basic outline of Matthew, from 2:13-15 (Holy Family Sunday, 17A) to 3:13-17 (the reading for today), to 4:1-11 (First Sunday of Lent, 22A).¹⁵ Here, in Chapter 3, the major theme of Matthew begins to take hold, namely that Jesus is the coming judge of the world.¹⁶ The first main part of the Gospel of Matthew lasts from 1:1 to 4:16. The second main part, discharging his public ministry to Israel lasts from 4:17 to 16:20, appearing in the Lectionary twenty-one more times, all in Cycle A.

In this spirit, John points out that he needs to be baptized by Jesus, rather than the other way around (Matthew 3:14). In the same spirit, Jesus does not confess his sins or repent, and thereby distinguishes himself from the Faithful. Jesus simply takes his stand with Israel. Jesus identifies himself with the Faithful on the margins of society. The Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus and not upon the People of God.¹⁷ In turn, the Faithful can identify themselves with those further to the margins of society than they themselves. This happens politically with social welfare programs. In a democratic society, everyone identifies with everyone else.

¹⁴ Jack Dean Kingsbury, "Observations on the "Miracle Chapters" of Mathew 8-9," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 40, No. 4 (October 1978) 564.

¹⁵ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, "Israel Standing with Israel: The Baptism of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 3:13-17)," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 3 (July 2002) 526.

¹⁶ W. R. G. Loader, "Son of David, Blindness, Possession, and Duality in Matthew," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 44, No. 4 (October 1982) 583.

¹⁷ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, "Israel Standing with Israel: The Baptism of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 3:13-17)," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 3 (July 2002) 521, 525.

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In his sermon, "That Prayer is to be placed Before all Things,"¹⁸ Saint Basil the Great (330-379) Bishop of Caesarea and one of the Four Great Eastern Doctors of the Church, proclaims, "I have committed many sins, and taken no notice of them." This proclamation as a reference to material sins arising from unconscious acts suits even Poor Clare nuns, to say nothing of yours truly. Isaiah 42:1 leaves the impression that righteousness is directly dependent upon God.¹⁹ For Jesus, there would have been no sin, not even unconscious material sin, but for John the Baptist, who knows? After all, he was jumping around in his mother's womb.

At our parish Masses, the Faithful frequently hear about evil thoughts in sermons. The Venerable Bede (672-735), Priest and Doctor elaborates. Evil thoughts come in three kinds. One is deliberation to commit sin. Another is dallying with deliberation without committing the sin. Finally, are plain distractions that prevent the mind from focusing on God, as Bede puts it, "with the vexatious importunity of flies."²⁰

The meaning of these readings is courage in the face of new insights, both personal and societal. Second Isaiah has to stand up to change the perceived notion of the coming Messiah. The enthronement psalm refers more to the inward hearts (and thoughts that concern parish sermons) of the Faithful than exterior grandeur and shouting. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter concludes that the Messiah is for Gentiles as well as Jews. Finally, John the Baptist is confused, but acts with courage anyway, when Jesus appears with the Faithful for baptism due to sin. The real baptism of Jesus due to sin comes with his passion and death.²¹ The Exodus is about his resurrection from the dead not only in the hearts of the Faithful, but also in his own life everlasting in which the Faithful also participate.

¹⁸ St. Basil the Great, Bishop and Doctor, PG 31. *Constitutiones Monasticae*, Ch I. in The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: Volume Two: From the First Sunday in Lent to the Sunday after the Ascension, tr. and ed. M. F. Toal, D.D. (P.O. Box 612, Swedesboro, NJ 08085: Preservation Press, 1996) 379.

¹⁹ J. Ferguson, Moral Values in the Ancient World (London: Methuen, 1958) as cited in footnote 47 in Louise Joy Lawrence, "For truly, I tell you, they have received their reward' (Matt 6:2): Investigating Honor Precedence and honor Virtue," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 4 (October 2002) 698.

²⁰ The Venerable Bede, Priest and Doctor, "The Fathers on Prayer," PL 94, Bk. 2, Hom. 7 in The Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers: Volume Two: From the First Sunday in Lent to the Sunday after the Ascension, tr. and ed. M. F. Toal, D.D. (P.O. Box 612, Swedesboro, NJ 08085: Preservation Press, 1996) 408.

²¹ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, "Israel Standing with Israel: The Baptism of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 3:13-17)," the Catholic Biblical Quarterly, Vol. 64, No. 3 (July 2002) 522.

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For more on sources see the Appendix file, which will be updated sometime after Christmas. I completed these Notes December 19, 2004 for January 9, 2005. This three-week lead gives me time to reconsider and mellow what I have written.