

Readings for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

15th January 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 49:1-7

Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The LORD called me before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb he named me. He made my mouth like a sharp sword, in the shadow of his hand he hid me; he made me a polished arrow, in his quiver he hid me away. And he said to me, 'You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.' But I said, 'I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; yet surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.'

And now the Lord says, who formed me in the womb to be his servant, to bring Jacob back to him, and that Israel might be gathered to him, for I am honoured in the sight of the LORD, and my God has become my strength. The Lord says, 'It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.'

Thus says the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One, to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nations, the slave of rulers, 'Kings shall see and stand up, princes, and they shall prostrate themselves, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.'

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

From Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Gospel: St John 1:29-42

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming towards him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, "After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me because he was before me." I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel.' And John testified, 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit." And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God.'

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, 'Look,

here is the Lamb of God!’ The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, ‘What are you looking for?’ They said to him, ‘Rabbi’ (which translated means Teacher), ‘where are you staying?’ He said to them, ‘Come and see.’ They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o’clock in the afternoon. One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. He first found his brother Simon and said to him, ‘We have found the Messiah’ (which is translated Anointed). He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, ‘You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas’ (which is translated Peter).

A Reflection for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

As human beings, it is important to us to mark the most significant stages in our lives. People of all cultures the world over have ceremonies and rituals, often associated with their religious faith and practice, for the birth of a child, for a coming-of-age, for marriage and to commit someone to God’s care when they die. To these, in more recent times, some cultures have added rather more secular celebrations, such as Baby Showers, School Proms, Graduation Balls and parties to celebrate all types of ‘big’ birthdays and anniversaries. We do that as individuals with our families and friends, but also as a society – last year we celebrated the Platinum Jubilee of the Late Queen, and my life, like most of yours, has been punctuated by her various Jubilees.

Similarly, in the Christian faith, we have Festivals throughout the year to mark important moments in the life of Jesus and ceremonies and rituals to mark stages on our own Christian journey. It is a journey that the psalmist reminds us begins before we were formed in our mother’s womb and continues beyond this earthly life to our being part of the great cloud of witnesses around the throne of heaven seen in the vision of St John the Divine in the book of Revelation.

Last week, in common with many others, I decided to keep Epiphany – it is after all a principal festival of the church. Had we not done so, we would have heard the account in Matthew’s Gospel of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. Jesus’ baptism is described directly in the Gospel’s of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and, as we hear today, more indirectly in John’s Gospel, as the witness testimony of John the Baptist - his recollection of what happened.

Like us, John the Baptist needs to recognise Jesus for who he is. Although he was God’s Messenger, preparing the way of the Lord as we heard in Advent, it is clear from today’s Gospel reading that recognition specifically of Jesus as the Messiah was not automatic even for him. Twice in this passage he says ‘I myself did not know him’. Each time, this statement is followed with ‘but...’. The first time ‘...but I came baptising with water for this reason, that he (Jesus) might be revealed to Israel’. The second time ‘...but the one who sent me to baptise with water said to me, “He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptises with the Holy Spirit.”’

John the Baptist is clear that his ministry was, in part, to allow the Messiah to be revealed by the Holy Spirit, and he goes on to testify that this sign, promised to him by God, is what he saw fulfilled. This, he declares, ‘is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world’ and ‘the Son of God’.

The phrase ‘the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world’ is very familiar to us as we say or sing it in all our Eucharistic services. It has been part of Christian liturgy since at least the 7th century. But ‘Lamb of God’ is not a

common term in the Bible. In the New Testament, it only appears twice, both in the passage set as today's Gospel. There are also repeated reference to 'the Lamb' in the book of Revelation, where it is clear that this refers to Jesus. For the first audience of the Gospel, and indeed for later readers, 'the Lamb of God' alludes to both the Passover lamb and also to the suffering servant in the prophecies of Isaiah.

Those who participated in last year's Lent Course may have recognised today's reading from Isaiah as the second 'Servant Song' of that book. The Servant Songs in Isaiah lead the reader from the idea of Israel as God's servant nation, but who fell short in their commitment to God's Law, to the Messiah, God's servant who will redeem the people. We see this in today's passage where the servant describes his role as being to bring God's people back to the Lord, and that role being extended as the Lord says 'I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth'. Later in Isaiah, it becomes clear that the servant will suffer and die to accomplish this mission. In the fourth Servant Song, the servant is described as being 'like a lamb that is led to the slaughter'.

Thus, in describing Jesus as 'the Lamb of God', John the Baptist is telling us more than that he is the Son of God. It not only connects him with Israel's history as the Passover Lamb, but also encompasses the whole mission of the Messiah and all it will entail. But that was in the future for John the Baptist, so this revelation at his baptism was a significant moment in the life of Jesus in marking the beginning of his public ministry.

Consideration of Jesus' baptism almost inevitably evokes memories of our own baptisms – or perhaps confirmations if we were baptised as infants.

Baptism, like many of the other ceremonies and rituals I mentioned at the beginning, marks a significant stage in our journey through life and in our journey of faith. It is not the beginning of that journey of faith, although often near the beginning, because something or someone has brought us to that point of seeking baptism. At baptism, or at confirmation if we were baptised at infants, we choose to respond to God's call in our lives and to commit ourselves to following Christ Jesus. And that means that our baptism is not simply something that happened to us at a fixed point in time but should also be an ongoing reality in our lives. Therefore, it is worth taking regular opportunities to recall our baptisms and baptismal promises and reflecting on them - and, if you are anything like me, resolving to work harder to fulfil them. Today, as we remember Jesus' baptism, is one such opportunity.

Baptism liturgies have changed a bit over the years, but the essentials remain very similar. In the current Baptism liturgy of our church, candidates are asked if they will turn from evil and turn to Christ, and they declare their faith in God the Father who made the world, God the Son who redeemed the world and God the Holy Spirit and God the Holy Spirit who gives life to God's people. Then they promise to continue in the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayer; to proclaim the good news in word and deed and serve Christ in all people; and to work for justice and peace, honouring God in all creation. How are you doing with these?

They are not light promises to make. Some people refer to them as the Baptismal covenant: our response to the generosity of God who sent his Son to suffer, to die and to rise again as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'.

Wherever we are on the journey of life and faith, and whatever curved balls circumstances throw at us, as Paul reminds us in today's reading from his first letter to the Corinthians, it is God who gives us the gifts and the strength

to continue striving to fulfil our Baptismal promises. And as Jesus himself promised his disciples after his resurrection 'Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (Matthew 28:20).