

Come to the Waters of Life!

The Baptism of Our Lord – Cycle B – January 10, 2021

Readings: Isa 55:1-11; 1 Jn 5:1-9 [or Isa 42:1-4, 6-7; Acts 10: 34-38]; Mk 1:7-11

“Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters” (Isa 55:1)

Prologue: Two sets of readings are recommended for today’s feast. Since I have earlier provided material for the readings with a focus on oil and anointment, we shall reflect on the symbol of water, which is central to the rite of baptism, besides being evocative of God’s Spirit. Being so essential for life, water was significant for the biblical writers who often faced drought. Indeed, water is a symbol of both, life and death, order and chaos, blessing and affliction.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. The first reading is from the final part of Second Isaiah’s ‘*Book of Consolation*’ (chapters 40 – 55). Post-exile, the prophet invites people to a joyful banquet where there will be plenty to eat and to drink: water, milk and wine (v.1). They shall come to God for water in order to be refreshed; for water is most basic when one is thirsty or dehydrated (see Ps 23:2-3). Moreover, they shall come to God for milk to be nourished, just as a child drinks milk for nourishment. Likewise, they shall also come to God for wine to celebrate and exult in the fullness of life which God alone can give: freely and without any limits and conditions. While verse 1 reads, “Come to the *waters*,” verse 3 specifies, “Come to *me*,” Yahweh, God, who alone can satisfy all thirsts (see Isa 41:17-18). Through the prophet God says: “I will make with you an *everlasting covenant*” and through earthy symbols of water and wine, bread and food, God promises supreme satisfaction to all those who truly thirst and who come to the Divine Wellspring. Symbolisms of food and drink most often refer to covenants as, for instance, with Adam and Eve (Gen 1:29-30), Noah and family (Gen 9:3), Passover (Ex 12; 24:11), ratification of the Sinai covenant (Neh 8:1-12), Isa 25:6, etc. However, while the divine partner’s love is everlasting, the human partners falter and fail, ever forsaking the God who calls, consecrates and commits Godself to covenantal love.
2. Last Sunday was celebrated as the Epiphany of Our Lord, a feast given much importance by the Western Church and theologically distinguished from the Baptism of Our Lord. However, the Eastern Orthodox and the Eastern Catholic Churches celebrate the Baptism of the Lord as integral part of the Epiphany, for Jesus’ baptism is also an Epiphany insofar as He is revealed as God’s “... my Son, the Beloved” (Mk 1:11). In the 3-year Sunday liturgical cycle, the details in the Synoptic Gospels are read and reflected upon since the historical details find mention in them. In this Cycle B, we have the Markan Baptism story, which differs slightly from the narratives of Matthew and Luke. While the latter two evangelists show the event as an *external epiphany* with the Spirit in form of a dove and a voice declaring, “*This is my Son*,” (Mt 3:17) and “*You are my Son*” (Lk 3:22) audible to those present, respectively, the gospel of Mark shows Jesus’ baptism as an *inner experience* for Jesus who hears the words, “*You are my Son, the Beloved*.” By recording the event, Mark wants the Christian community to realize *who Jesus is* [identity] and *what Jesus will accomplish* [mission]. After Jesus shows solidarity with sinners lined up for baptism by John and emerges from the waters of the Jordan, the Spirit will drive him into the wilderness to be tempted (Mk 1:12). He will then begin his ministry in Galilee (Mk 1:14), will move to the mount of Transfiguration, and finally to Jerusalem and the mount of death, Calvary.

- Celebrating Jesus' baptism, let's reflect on the biblical symbol of water. Genesis (1:2) describes the earth as a chaotic 'deep' watery wasteland, over which God's spirit hovers, creating the cosmos. God is Creator and Master of the waters. God opened "the windows of heaven" to destroy sinful humankind in the Flood (Gen 7:11) and keeps the sea within bounds (Job 38:11). Moreover, Jesus is shown as Lord of waters and Master of the seas. "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink ... Out of the believer's heart shall flow streams of living water" (Jn 7:37-38). A Samaritan woman gets converted and becomes an evangelist on account of Jesus' encounter with her by Jacob's well and his promise to give her "living water" (Jn 4:10) and "a spring of water gushing up to eternal life" (Jn 4:14). The immersion in water of Christian baptism always signifies both cleansing and a passage from death to life (see Col 2:12). It also signifies spiritual rebirth that marries the material with the spiritual, and water with the Spirit, as Jesus explained to Nicodemus (Jn 3:5). Thus, while Jesus stood at the Jordan in line with sinners—like me and you—entered it and emerged with the Trinitarian echoing of filiation, so too are we invited to experience the 'inner epiphany' with that divine voice, whispering: "*You are my son, my daughter*"

Linking the Second Reading to the Baptismal Theme of Water:

The 2nd reading from the First Letter of John focuses on love and Jesus' love command, with the exhortation to live in love. The confession of faith, "Jesus is God" (vv.1,5) must be concretely witnessed to with acts of love. Jesus gave witness to being Son of God "not with the water only but with the water and the blood" (v.6). In Jn 1:31-32, John the Baptist testifies to Jesus being preexistent Son of God by linking him with the descent of the Spirit and baptism. Verse 1 Jn 5:7—"There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree" (vv.7,8)—refers to the testimony given by the Spirit; for Jesus' sending is linked with the boundless gift of the Spirit (Jn 3:34; 7:38-39). It also points to the inseparable link between Jordan and Calvary, between water and blood; for evangelist John will testify to Christ's crucifixion where blood and water flowed from his side (Jn 19:34-35). In other words, at his Baptism in the Jordan, Jesus is revealed as saviour and servant. He stands with sinners to serve them and save them. Thus, Paul writes, "For our sake God made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).

Three Contextual Concerns:

- ***Human Concern:*** Water accounts for about 60% of our body weight. Like little streams irrigating arid land, water flows through our bodies, transports nutrients, flushes out toxins, and provides protective moisture for organs like our eyes and ears. Thank God!
- ***Interreligious Concern:*** Water is sacred in all religious traditions. Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Sindhu, and Kaveri make up the seven of the holiest of rivers. "In the waters, O Lord, is your seat," says the *Satpatha Brahmana* (I.I-9). The Qur'ān has many references to water, washing, rain, rivers, etc. Rainfall is regarded as an overflow of Allah's benevolence and the sending down of revelation to humankind.
- ***Cosmic Concern:*** "Our world has a grave social debt towards the poor who lack access to drinking water, because *they are denied the right to a life consistent with their inalienable dignity.*" Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*, n.30. What is our attitude to water?

In Lighter Vein: Fresh after his graduation as a plumber, a youth went to see the Niagara Falls. He studied it awhile and proudly proclaimed: "I think I can fix it!" The waters of God's Spirit can never be fixed. They well up within us, and if allowed free rein, will not merely irrigate our sterile, fruitless lives but will inundate all those around us with joy, love, peace and prophetic power to cleanse our world from all forms of filth and fruitlessness. [End]