

Here I am, Lord, to Witness to YOU!

2nd Sunday of the Year A: 19 January 2020

Readings: Isa 49:3,5-6; 1 Cor 1:1-3; Jn 1:29-30,33-34

“Here I am, Lord! I come to do your will!” (Ps 40:7-8)

Note: Today’s readings can be seen in terms of witnessing to God/Christ. Words like servant, apostle, light, witness and so on appear in the texts and can be used profitably for catechesis.

Three Scriptural Signposts:

1. Today’s first reading has the second ‘suffering servant’ prophecy of Isaiah—four of which are found in chapters 42-53 of the book (last Sunday’s reading had the first one). Amidst the tears, trials and tribulations of the Babylonian Exile, the prophecy breathes hope by pointing out to and predicting the arrival of God’s servant, the Messiah, who will be faithful to God, as well as apt representative of humankind by his accepting suffering with heroic courage and commitment. This second servant-song adds to the significance of the Servant-Messiah by mentioning his commissioning “from the womb” and by making his Messianism “a light to the nations so that salvation would reach the ends of the earth” (Isa 49:6). The salvation promised here is not only limited to the Jews, the people of Israel, but to the whole world. Indeed, since God is the creator of everyone, God must also save the created world with the cooperation of humankind.
2. The gospel passage refers to another prophet, John the Baptist, who is the herald and witness to the Messiah, the Christ. As if to tell those awaiting the Messiah that they need not wait any longer, the Baptist declares: “Look, *there* is the lamb of God!” (Jn 1:29). John is “a voice of one crying out in the wilderness” (v.23) proclaiming, “I have seen and I bear witness that He is the Son of God!” (v.34). Unlike the Synoptic gospels (i.e., Matthew, Mark, Luke), this first chapter of John’s gospel does not describe Jesus’ baptism as a story-narrative but gives it theological significance by John the Baptist’s testimony, thereby dispelling any doubts arising among his disciples and Jesus’ disciples as to who was greater: “A man is coming after me who ranks before me because he existed before me” (v.30). John’s testimony is contemporaneously crystal clear to the Jewish priests, Levites and others sent by the Pharisees (vv.19,24).
3. Note that the gospel is marked by many ‘witness words’ like “see”, “look”, “know” and “reveal”. Moreover, John is already shown as being reluctant to baptize Jesus since he is ‘inferior’, so to say, as compared to Jesus. Like the presenter of a TV show or a *‘sutradaar’* who disappears after spotlights converge on some superstar or celebrity, the Baptist—who elsewhere asserts, “He must increase, I must decrease” (Jn 3:30)—gives Jesus centre-stage and fades away as witness. Indeed, John’s mission is meaningful precisely because he is a witness. John’s witnessing in this passage is more powerful than the Synoptic accounts because: (a) John reinforces Jesus’ servanthood and call to be the saviour who “takes away the sin of the world” [v.29], and, (b) John mentions that the Spirit not only came upon Jesus but “rested on him” (vv.32,33). Being so fully invested with the Spirit, only Jesus alone—and not John—“baptizes with the Holy Spirit” (v.33).

Linking the Second Reading to the Theme of Witnessing:

Down through the Christian centuries, Jesus Christ has had innumerable witnesses and finger-pointers, so to say, pointing out to Him and to His Way. A great witness is Paul who, referring to himself in the second reading says: “[I], Paul, called to be an *apostle* of Christ Jesus by the *will of God* ...!” An apostle is one who ‘goes before’ the Lord. Paul goes forth not by his own choice and trusting in his own charism, but entirely dependent on God’s will. Moreover, there is also mention of Sosthenes—probably the synagogue-official mentioned in Acts 18:17 who was converted through the preaching of Paul—who perhaps knew many in Corinth and helps Paul in spreading the Good News there. Mention is made of “their Lord and ours” to show that God no longer is to be worshiped by just one community but by all. Jesus is the universal Saviour.

The Psalm (40) as a Response to God’s Call for Witnesses

“Here I am, Lord!”— the refrain of today’s psalm expresses what should be the ideal disposition of one called to witness to Christ. Ever ready! The Greek equivalent for ‘witness’ is ‘*marturion*’, from where we get the English ‘martyr’! Among the first Christians who followed Christ, there were innumerable witnesses or martyrs, who were ‘blood-witnesses’ to Him. Thus, from earliest times the Church considers martyrdom as a “baptism of blood” that can replace sacramental baptism. The repetition of this psalm – “You take no pleasure in sacrifices and offerings; instead, here I come to do your will” – used for Jesus (in Heb 10:5-10) indicates that witnessing to Christ involves not only words and worship, but also works, which could climax in total sacrifice of one’s life. John the Baptist and Paul would soon become exemplary blood-witnesses to Christ.

Three Texts from Tradition: Martyrs Witnessing and Writings:

1. Ignatius of Antioch (c.35-108 AD): Traveling to Rome to be martyred, he wrote seven letters, including one with the words: “Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, which is my way of reaching God. I am God’s wheat, and I am to be ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become the pure bread of Christ.” Later, “Neither the pleasures of the world nor the kingdoms of this age will be of any use to me. It is better for me to die in order to unite myself to Christ Jesus than to reign over the ends of the earth. I seek Him who died for us; I desire Him who rose for us. My birth is approaching...”
2. Account from the ‘Martyrdom of Polycarp’ (c.69-155 AD): “So they [persecutors] simply bound him [Polycarp] with his hands behind him like a distinguished ram chosen from a great flock for sacrifice. Ready to be an acceptable burnt-offering to God, Polycarp looked up to heaven and said, “O Lord God Almighty, I give you thanks that you count me worthy to be numbered among your martyrs, sharing the cup of Christ and the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body, through the immortality of the Holy Spirit. May I be received this day as an acceptable sacrifice, as you, the true God, have predestined, revealed to me, and now fulfilled.”
3. Tertullian (c.155-220 AD): “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church” (in his *Apologeticus*, chapter 50).

Reflection and Prayer: When the Guru pointed to the moon, all that the disciple saw was his finger. May our sights be set on Him, alone. So, we pray: “Lord Jesus, may my life not point to myself or anyone else; but to YOU who must increase; while I, decrease.”
