

Homily for the 2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

January 15, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Isaiah 49:3, 5-6 (You are my servant, through whom I show my glory.)

Responsory: Psalm 40 (Here I am, Lord; I come to do your will.)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:1-3 (You have been sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy.)

Gospel: John 1:29-34 (Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.)

I suspect that everyone is pretty familiar with the story of Jesus' baptism. We all know about the Spirit descending upon him in the form of a dove, and the voice from the heavens solemnly declaring him to be God's beloved Son. Most years, all of us get to hear that story on the second Sunday of January. The Baptism of the Lord serves as a fitting conclusion to the Christmas season. It's also a fitting start to Ordinary Time, when the gospels follow the ministry of Jesus from its beginning, right after his baptism, until its dramatic ending on the cross. Unfortunately, when Christmas falls on Sunday or Monday, the Baptism of the Lord gets shifted to Monday, the day after Epiphany, and most people end up missing this special feast day entirely. But, in today's gospel, John the Baptist reminds us of what happened on that fateful day at the Jordan River and why it's so important for us Christians, *even today*. He helps us to reflect on the mystery and the meaning of Jesus' baptism, as well as our own baptism in the Christian faith.

As the scene opens, John is doing exactly what he was called to do – proclaim the Lord and direct people to follow him. John admits (twice) that he did not know Jesus when he came to be baptized. What opened John's eyes to recognize the Messiah in his presence is when the Spirit descended upon him. That visible manifestation of the Spirit revealed to John that Jesus was the one he was expecting, the one mightier than he.

John clearly understood the limits of his own ministry. He could only baptize with *water*, for the sole purpose of cleansing people from their past sins. His was a ritual that looked to the past, but made no promises about a person's future. However, as the last and greatest prophet of the pre-Christian era, John foresaw that the one who was coming after him would have the power to baptize with *the Holy Spirit*. His baptism would be *forward-looking*. It would not merely remove the guilt of one's past sins, but also free the baptized from the power of sin and death *forever*. That's why John calls Jesus "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

Of course, John is speaking prophetically about what is to come. The saving baptism which he anticipates is not something that Jesus would do during his ministry on earth, but rather, something that he would accomplish *through the ministry of the Church*. First, Christ had to suffer and die, offering up his life for us on the cross. Baptism gets its power from the Paschal Mystery. When we enter into the baptismal waters and rise up from them, we are sacramentally united to Christ's death and resurrection. We symbolically share in his death, so that we can one day share *fully and eternally* in his resurrected life.

The symbol of a sacrificial lamb which takes away sin would have been very familiar to all Jewish readers of the Gospel. They were accustomed to sacrificing lambs as sin offerings in the Temple. They would come with their burden of sin and present their offering to the priest. Then, once he performed the prescribed ritual, they would be able to go home feeling free of guilt, at least for a while. But, this ritual would have to be repeated many times, as people continued to incur guilt and needed to return to seek God's pardon again and again. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was entirely different. As the Divine Son of God, his *self-offering* on behalf of all sinners was the perfect sacrifice which would never have to be repeated. He rescued all sinners of all generations from the grip of sin and its consequence of death. This singular and eternal aspect of Jesus' sacrifice makes him less like an ordinary lamb handed over as a sin offering and more akin to the *Passover lamb* in the Book of Exodus.

Every Jew knows this story very well, for it's the story of their salvation as God's Chosen People. Before the final plague, the death of the firstborn of every household, swept over Egypt, each Israelite family sacrificed a lamb and marked their houses with its blood. The blood of the lamb saved them that night, and the horror that ensued for all the families who were *not* so protected was the final straw that forced the Egyptians to let the Israelites go free. So, the death of the Passover lambs meant *life* and *freedom* for the whole Israelite community. Centuries later, God the Father sent his Son into the world to be a *new* Passover Lamb, to grant a new type of freedom, and eternal life, to all those who believe in him.

When we hear the Prophet Isaiah's description of God's faithful servant, it appears to us that he's speaking about the person and mission of Jesus. Jesus is the servant through whom God shows his glory, the one formed from the womb with the intention of bringing back the lost children of Israel. He is made glorious in the sight of the Lord, not because he could command armies and conquer enemies on the battlefield, but because his extraordinary love and obedience to the Father's will would lead him to a much *greater* victory on the cross. However, as Isaiah proclaims, this victory would not be for the Jewish people *alone*. "It is too little, the Lord says, for you to be my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and restore the survivors of Israel; I will make you a *light to the nations*, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."

That promise of salvation has indeed reached to the ends of the earth and to all generations of believers, including us. Hence, when St. Paul refers to the Christian community in Corinth as "you who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus," he's also describing all of us who have been baptized into the Paschal Mystery of his death and resurrection. Paul then adds that they, *and we*, are also "called to be holy." So, the gift of grace that we have received through baptism calls forth a *response* from us. The Spirit, which manifested itself at Jesus' baptism and now dwells within us, constantly draws us to *seek* the Lord and to *serve* the Lord. Let us not be passive recipients of so great a gift, but grateful servants who heed our Master's call. Like the Psalmist, let each one of us say with zeal and conviction, "Here I am Lord; I come to do your will."