

Epiphany Season

Colour: white

The Baptism of the Lord Year A

First Reading: Isaiah 42: 1-9

1 Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.

2 He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets.

3 A bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;

4 he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his law the islands will put their hope.

5 This is what God the LORD says— he who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it, who gives breath to its people, and life to those who walk on it:

6 I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles,

7 to open eyes that are blind, to free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

8 I am the LORD; that is my name! I will not give my glory to another or my praise to idols.

9 See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being I announce them to you. Song of Praise to the LORD

What's going on?

This passage from the prophet Isaiah in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) tells us more about God's servant and what he will do. God's servant will be filled with God's Spirit, and will act to bring justice to human society. God is the creator God who has made the whole of the universe, but he cares so much for what he has created that he will send his servant to put things right where they have gone wrong. The servant will help people understand the truth about God, free those wrongly imprisoned and help people who have been badly treated or wronged. The coming of this reign of

justice will attract others who do not know the truth about God and they will seek it as well. Isaiah says that he is speaking of a future time, and so these words not only describe his own situation but teach us about what God has done in sending Jesus, his own Son, as his servant into the world.

Psalm 29

A psalm of David.

1 Ascribe to the LORD, O mighty ones, ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.

2 Ascribe to the LORD the glory due to his name; worship the LORD in the splendour of his holiness.

3 The voice of the LORD is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the LORD thunders over the mighty waters.

4 The voice of the LORD is powerful; the voice of the LORD is majestic.

5 The voice of the LORD breaks the cedars; the LORD breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

6 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, Sirion like a young wild ox.

7 The voice of the LORD strikes with flashes of lightning.

8 The voice of the LORD shakes the desert; the LORD shakes the Desert of Kadesh.

9 The voice of the LORD twists the oaks and strips the forests bare. And in his temple all cry, Glory!

10 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD is enthroned as King for ever.

11 The LORD gives strength to his people; the LORD blesses his people with peace.

What's going on?

This psalm reminds us of the greatness of God and the way God's power and might can be imagined from seeing the great forces of nature in action. Although we often think of God the Father as perhaps rather passive in his loving and caring for the creation, these words remind us that God is both dynamic and powerful. God is also King.

Acts 10:34-43

34 Then Peter began to speak: I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism

35 but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all.

37 You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached—

38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

39 We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree,

40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen.

41 He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen— by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead.

43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

What's going on?

Peter, Jesus' disciple, and now one of his first evangelists, begins by telling everyone that God wants everyone who is searching for him to find him. He says that Jesus was born among the Jewish people and preached the message of God to them, but that the command to Peter and all the disciples was to spread that message to everybody, so that everybody who comes to believe in Jesus becomes part of the same family, loved, forgiven and saved by God forever. At the heart of this is the memory of John the Baptist telling people about baptism by water as a ritual way of asking for forgiveness and being made clean as sins were washed away. Yet Jesus too, was also baptised by John and when that happened God made himself known. At that moment Jesus' purpose was confirmed and his ministry of healing and teaching, ending in his death and resurrection, established. So Peter refers

back to Jesus' baptism as a defining moment when God confirmed who Jesus really was. This is the story we will hear in the Gospel.

Gospel Matthew 3.13-17

The Baptism of Jesus

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John.

14 But John tried to deter him, saying, I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?

15 Jesus replied, Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness. Then John consented.

16 As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.

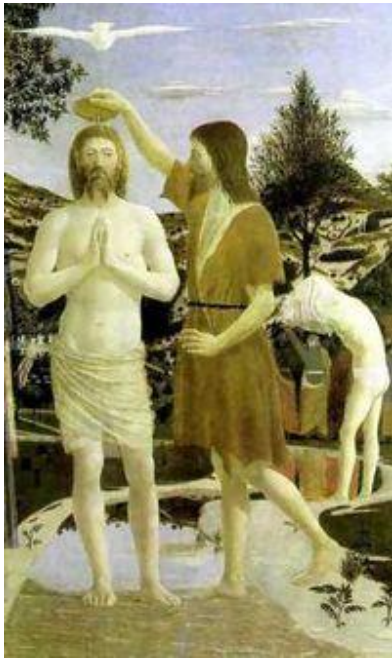
17 And a voice from heaven said, This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.

What's going on?

John was already baptising people in the river Jordan. People went into the water as a way of saying sorry to God for the things they had done wrong as a way of making a new start. In a country and at a time when people got dirty very easily, washing was an important part of both personal and religious custom. Jesus comes in his turn to John who, recognising him for who he is, says that he is not worthy to perform the ritual of baptism for Jesus. Jesus, however, asks John to baptise him, which he then does. As Jesus comes out of the river, God's Spirit 'like a dove' comes upon him and God's voice from heaven announces Jesus as his Son, and of God's satisfaction and favour for Jesus' life, his humility and obedience in coming for baptism, his accepting of ministry, and in his example. This is an important moment in the gospel, because in this revelation, the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit are revealed together, teaching us about the nature of God.

Why these passages?

Epiphany season focuses on biblical events in which different people recognise Jesus as God's son, and saviour. God, the powerful King of Creation that we see in the psalm sends humanity a Son who is to be a servant, obedient to God's purposes, as described in Isaiah. The baptism of Jesus is an important event in this sequence because it lays the ground for the season of Lent which arrives shortly, and which focuses on Jesus' going into the desert to fast and to think and pray about his ministry and purpose.



The Baptism of Christ by Piero della Francesca c 1449