

## FIRST READING – A BAPTISM OF THE LORD

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Thus says the Lord:

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold,  
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;  
I have put my spirit upon him;  
he will bring forth justice to the nations.  
He will not cry or lift up his voice,  
or make it heard in the street;  
a bruised reed he will not break,  
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;  
he will faithfully bring forth justice.  
He will not grow faint or be crushed  
until he has established justice in the earth;  
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.  
I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness,  
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;  
I have given you as a covenant to the people,  
a light to the nations,  
to open the eyes that are blind,  
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,  
from the prison those who sit in darkness.”



Pause for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## SECOND READING – A BAPTISM OF THE LORD

A reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

Peter began to speak:

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality,  
but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right  
is acceptable to him.

You know the message he sent to the people of Israel,  
preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all.

That message spread throughout Judea,  
beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced:  
how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth  
with the Holy Spirit and with power;  
how he went about doing good  
and healing all who were oppressed by the devil,  
for God was with him.”



Pause for **THREE** seconds  
then look up at the people  
and say SLOWLY:

The WORD of the LORD.

*Thanks be to God.*

## GOSPEL READING – A BAPTISM OF THE LORD

The Lord be with you.

*And with your spirit.*

A reading from the holy gospel according to Matthew.

*Glory to you, O Lord*

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan,  
to be baptised by him.  
John would have prevented him, saying,  
“I need to be baptised by you,  
and do you come to me?”  
But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so for now;  
for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.”  
Then John consented.  
And when Jesus had been baptized,  
just as he came up from the water,  
suddenly the heavens were opened to him  
and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove  
and alighting on him.  
And a voice from heaven said,  
“This is my Son, the Beloved,  
with whom I am well pleased.”



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

*Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

## SCRIPTURES IN DEPTH

In the Eastern Church, the primary emphasis of Epiphany was theological rather than historical: the epiphany of God in the humanity of the incarnate One. Indeed, the whole life of Christ was a series of epiphanies, of which his baptism was the first and most important.

The original prominence of the baptismal epiphany was never completely forgotten in the West, but it was relegated to a corner in the liturgy—in the Roman Missal, to the gospel for the octave; in the Book of Common Prayer of 1928, to an office lesson.

The revisers of the calendar could hardly have been expected to restore the baptism to its Eastern prominence by putting it on the actual day of Epiphany. The story of the Magi is too popular in Western Christian lore for that.

In the present calendar, the baptism is celebrated on the Sunday after January 6 if this Sunday does not coincide with Epiphany; if it does coincide, the baptism is transferred to the Monday after Epiphany.

Thus, the feast has regained some prominence, and for this we may be glad. It helps to reinforce the theological, as opposed to the historical, emphasis of our Western Christmas cycle of feasts.

Reading I: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

This passage, the first of the servant songs in Second Isaiah, has deeply impregnated the Gospel narratives of our Lord's baptism. The heavenly voice at the baptism ("This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased") is, in part at least, an echo of the words "in whom my soul delights" (Is 42:1).

The word for "beloved" may be an alternative rendering of "chosen," and it is held by some that the word "son" is based on an ambiguous rendering of the original Aramaic word for "servant."

Note that Mt 12:18 has a formula quotation of Is 42:1-4 as, an explanation of Jesus' command to the healed not to make him known, the emphasis here being on verses 2-3 in the Isaian prophecy.

The original identity of the servant is a much controverted question. Some think that he represents the whole nation of Israel; others, a faithful remnant; and still others, an individual figure—the prophet himself, or some prophet or king of the past, or perhaps a messianic figure of the future.

What the original meaning was need not concern us here. In the liturgy today, as in the evangelists, the servant is identified with Jesus, who is manifested as such in his baptism.

The latter part of the song speaks of the work of the servant: to establish peace on earth, to be a covenant to Israel and a revelation to the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, and to proclaim the liberation of captives.

This forms a suitable introduction to the stories from the earthly ministry of Jesus that will be read between now and the beginning of Lent. Jesus' words and deeds are an epiphany of the servant of the Lord.

Responsorial Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10

In some ways this psalm is like the other enthronement psalms we have encountered, for it celebrates the kingship of YHWH ("the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever"). But there are differences.

The second stanza suggests that the psalm had its origin in a pagan hymn to Baal-hadad, the storm god of Canaan. Its meter also recalls Canaanite poetry as known from Ugaritic texts.

But if that was its origin, the hymn has been thoroughly baptized: the storm has become an epiphany of YHWH, the Creator-God.

In its present liturgical context, however, the hymn acquires yet another meaning. "The voice of the Lord upon the waters" suggests a voice from heaven at the baptism of Jesus.

So the psalm becomes a celebration of the epiphany of God that takes place at the baptism of Jesus.

Reading II: Acts 10:34-38-21 (long form); 3:12-17 (short form)

This passage comes from one of the kerygmatic speeches of Acts, that is, formulations of the kerygma, or preaching of the early Church. It is remarkable as the only reference to Jesus' baptism outside the Gospels.

Like Mark and John, it presents that event as the beginning of Jesus' story. In his baptism he is anointed with the Holy Spirit and so equipped for his ministry of healing and exorcism. Note how the history of Jesus is told as a series of acts of God.

It is God who preaches the good news of peace in Jesus Christ, God who anoints him, and God who is with him in the performance of his miracles.

It is often held that there is a radical difference between the message of Jesus and the proclamation of the early Church. Jesus preached the kingdom, but the Church preached Jesus!

There is certainly a formal difference here but not a material one.

In proclaiming the kingdom, in performing exorcisms and healings, Jesus was witnessing to the presence of God acting eschatologically in his own words and works.

And in proclaiming Jesus, the Church, as we can see from the present reading, was proclaiming that God had been present in Jesus' word and work.

The Church proclaimed Jesus precisely as the act of God, the epiphany of his saving presence. This epiphany is activated at the baptism.

Gospel: Matthew 3:13-17

Matthew's account of the baptism differs from that of Mark, which Matthew probably used as his basic source, in two points. First, there is the little dialogue between Jesus and John. Matthew inserted this because in some way he felt that Jesus' baptism at the hands of John created difficulties.

It is often thought that Matthew's problem was the sinlessness of Jesus—how could the sinless One submit to a baptism of repentance for the remission of sin?

But there is not a trace of concern about Jesus' sinlessness in the narrative. All the stress is on the persons of John and Jesus: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

As we saw in our discussion of the Johannine prologue (Christmas, Mass During the Day), there was a "baptist" sect which held that John was the bearer of God's final revelation, in competition with the Christian Church. This made the story of Jesus' baptism (whose historicity, for that very reason, is beyond all reasonable doubt) embarrassing for Christians.

It would seem that by submitting to John's baptism, Jesus tacitly admitted John's superiority to himself, and therefore sided with the "baptists" against the Christians.

Matthew explains Jesus' submission to John's baptism by inserting this little dialogue, in which Jesus gives the reason: "thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." This word recalls that of Is 42:6 in the first reading: "I have called you in righteousness," that is, in order to fulfill my purpose in salvation history.

Thus, Jesus' reply to John underlines the servant Christology of the baptism narrative. Jesus' submission to John's baptism was part of God's plan, so that Jesus would be manifested as the servant of YHWH, now about to embark upon his mission.

Matthew's second change is in the wording of the voice from heaven. Mark has: "Thou art my beloved Son," thus making it a direct address to Jesus only. This suggests that originally the baptism was pictured as a personal experience of Jesus—his call from God to begin his mission.

Mark may already have intended this, for by including it in his Gospel he wants to explain to the reader who Jesus is, not as part of Jesus' biography.

But Matthew wants to make it quite clear that the baptism is rather an epiphany declaring to the Church the true identity of Jesus: he is the servant of YHWH, fulfilling in his person the mission of the servant as depicted in Second Isaiah.

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