

Feast of the Epiphany

January 2, 2011

INTRODUCTION: Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians 587 years before Christ. Fifty years later, the Persians (people living in modern day Iran) conquered the Babylonians, and they allowed the Jews to return home. They found their city and their homeland still in shambles. Rebuilding was extremely difficult. Today's prophet, whom we hear in our first reading, tries to encourage the people and assure them Jerusalem would again be a great city. He sees Jerusalem becoming the center of spirituality and light for all the world. People would come from everywhere to visit Jerusalem and to be nourished by the spiritual light and life radiating from it. St. Matthew sees this vision fulfilled in the birth of Jesus and the coming of the magi. Through Jesus, the message of God's love and salvation will radiate to all the world.

HOMILY: Happy New Year to everyone here! There was a cartoon in a publication I get with a man and his wife sitting by their Christmas tree. He was holding a book in his lap saying to her: "It's a nice gift, but I have mixed feelings about a leather-bound collection of my New Year's resolutions from the last twenty years." (The Joyful Noiseletter, Jan. 2005)

We've all gotten a year older and there are plenty of funny stories about aging. I'll just entertain you with one so I have a little time to talk about our gospel: A man was telling his friend: "I've sure gotten old! I've had two bypass surgeries, a hip replacement, new knees, fought diabetes and I'm half blind. I take 40 different medications that make me dizzy, winded and subject to blackouts. I have bouts with dementia, poor circulation, hardly feel my hands and feet anymore. Can't remember if I'm 85 or 92. Have lost all my friends. But, thank God, I still have my driver's license." (from an email) Remember this in the new year: "You don't stop laughing because you grow old, you grow old because you stop laughing."

Today's gospel is one of the most popular stories in the Bible and rightly so. It recognizes the essence of the gospel story that God has made himself present to us in the person of Jesus, God's only Son, God from God, light from light, true God from true God...one in being with the Father. Previously in Matthew's gospel, Matthew told us another name for Jesus would be Emmanuel, "God with us."

The revelation that Jesus was Son of God is offensive to some, a contradiction to others, but it is salvation for those who believe in Jesus. The magi are the forerunners of those who would come to believe in Jesus, the first of those people foreseen by the prophet 500 years before Christ who would come to Jerusalem seeking the light of God's glory. The magi are the first of those who would do homage to Jesus who would in a few short years be made known to all nations through the preaching of the apostles.

In the Book of Numbers (the fourth book of the Bible) there is a story of the Jews on their way to the Promised Land, under the leadership of Moses, after their liberation from their slavery in Egypt. On their way, they had to pass through the land of Moab, the area just east of the Dead

Sea. The king of Moab hired a famous soothsayer from the East, a man named Balaam, to come and lay a curse on the Israelites. Balaam would have been a kind of magi, for that's what magi did. They were practiced in the occult arts: astronomers, fortunetellers and magicians with preternatural powers. It's an interesting story of how his donkey saw an angel blocking the way and the donkey refused to go on. Balaam beat his donkey and the donkey spoke to him. Then Balaam saw the angel and asked forgiveness. Eventually Balaam got to Moab and could see the Israelites from a mountain, but he couldn't curse them. Every time he tried to speak he could only speak a blessing. Among his oracles, Balaam saw a king who would come from Israel, whose royalty would be exalted. He said: "I see him, though not now; I behold him, though not near: A star shall advance from Jacob, and a staff shall rise from Israel." Balaam's oracle was later seen to apply to King David who would not reign until almost 300 years later (thus: "I behold him, though not now.") Later Judaism saw this as a reference to the Messiah.

The magi who visited Jesus when he was born, in seeing the star of the King of the Jews at its rising, were to "behold him, but not now." His kingship would not be proclaimed until he had hung on the cross beneath the title The King of the Jews, and had been raised up to be seated at the right hand of the Father in the resurrection.

Already we see in today's readings those who should have embraced his reign as either indifferent to him, such as the chief priests, or seriously threatened by him, such as Herod. Yet, in spite of opposition, people have always given him homage and always will, for as the angel announced to Mary, of his kingdom there will be no end. Amen.

Baptism of the Lord - A Cycle

January 9, 2011

INTRODUCTION

The words of the prophet Isaiah, in today's first reading, go back 500 years before Christ. This passage was intended for the Jews who were in exile in Babylon. God is, through the prophet, introducing a person referred to only as God's servant to his people. God is quite pleased with his servant. In a non-violent way, God's servant will establish justice in the world, be a light to the nations and liberation for captives. Scholars debate who this servant might have been 500 years before Christ, but with the coming of Christ, there is no doubt who is God's perfect servant. At Jesus' baptism, God introduces Jesus to the world, not just as his servant, but as his beloved Son with whom he is well-pleased.

HOMILY

If you struggle to understand the baptism of Jesus, you're not alone. Even John the Baptist had difficulty understanding why Jesus came to him for baptism. As John said "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?"

The baptism of Jesus is a mystery worthy of our contemplation. Certainly Pope John Paul

considered it as something worth meditating on when he made it one of the mysteries in the new set of mysteries he created for the rosary: the luminous mysteries or the mysteries of light.

When Carol Roosa was taking a course at the Athenaeum to become our pastoral administrator, she had to present a paper on the topic of baptism. The professor was quite impressed with it and so she volunteered to preach this Sunday. I said "no." She said it would only take an hour and fifteen minutes. You will be happy to know I stood my ground. Besides, only priests and deacons are allowed to do a homily. I say all of this to illustrate there is so much that could be said about baptism. I'm not going to say it all. My few words today will, I hope, throw a little light on the sacrament of baptism and might help make the baptism of Jesus a little more understandable.

First I want to point out one way in which the baptism of Jesus by John was totally different from our sacrament of baptism. Then I want to mention one way in which they are similar.

If I were to ask the average Catholic what they think of when they hear the word baptism, most would answer, "Baptism takes away original sin." That's true, but there is a better answer. Let me illustrate. (show wallet) Now many of you know what this is: a wallet. And it's empty, and some of you might relate to that too. That's basically what original sin is. It is emptiness, like this wallet. It's a big nothing. We are empty of God's grace and life. Suppose, for example, by some unbelievable odds, I would win a million dollars in the lottery. I would get that big check (less taxes) and put it in the wallet. If someone were to ask me, "what's in your wallet?," I don't know what I would tell them, but I don't think I would answer "the emptiness in my wallet is gone." But that's what we say when we define baptism as the sacrament that takes away original sin. That definition only emphasizes the emptiness and not the fullness. It doesn't reflect the blessings that suddenly fill us at baptism: the blessings of God's life, of being children of God, the blessings of the Holy Spirit, the blessing of belonging to the family of God, the blessing and hope of sharing in eternal happiness with God. In Jesus there was no emptiness. In him dwells the fullness of the divinity (Col. 2,9) as St. Paul tells us. He was, from all eternity, God's beloved Son. Jesus had no need of baptism in any form. In this respect Jesus' baptism by John made no change in him as the sacrament of baptism did for us. Jesus' baptism by John provides an occasion for us to reflect on our own baptism and the grace that it brought us.

Now I want to describe one way in which Jesus' baptism by John and the sacrament of baptism we received are similar. They are similar in that they are both a commitment. John's baptism was a public commitment people made to live holy lives and to prepare for the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus, in being baptized, was publicly committing himself to do God's will and to preach and build the kingdom of God. Baptism is that for us too. We are committed, in a public event, to belong to God, to be God's obedient child, God's lover, God's representative. It's something like declaring one's candidacy, not for public office, but for the office of Christian in the world. Most likely someone made that commitment for us, most probably our parents. They made that commitment for us with the intention of directing us in God's ways. Eventually, we have to make that commitment our own if our baptism is going to mean anything at all. On this feast of the baptism of Jesus, we have a good opportunity to recommit ourselves to Jesus. The

effects and blessings of baptism remain with us as long as we do not turn our hearts away from the Father who long ago chose us to be his son or daughter in the sacrament. In this way Jesus' baptism by John is very much like our own, not a private, secret event but a public, open declaration of our commitment to love and serve God and others as Jesus, the perfect Son of God did. Amen.

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

January 16, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Is 49,3.5-6; I Cor. 1,1-3; Jn. 1,29-34)

Last week, in our first reading, we heard about God's servant who would bring justice and light to the world. We hear again about God's servant leading the people of Israel back to God, and bringing God's salvation to the ends of the earth. These passages about God's servant (there are four of them) were written over 500 years before Christ. Scholars do not know exactly who might have fit the description of God's servant at that time, but with the advantage of hindsight we see how perfectly the servant songs describe God's perfect servant, Jesus Christ.

HOMILY:

One weekend, a doctor, a priest and an attorney were out in a fishing boat. Their motor had died and one of their oars had been dropped in the water and was drifting off. Just as the doctor was about to dive in to retrieve the oar, the boat was surrounded by sharks. Suddenly the doctor changed his mind and said, "I can't jump in now. Someone might get bitten and they'll need my medical services." The priest said "I can't go. If the doctor suffered a fatal bite, I would have to give him the last rites." "Fine," said the attorney, "I'll get the oar," and he dove in. The sharks moved away, he retrieved the oar and got back into the boat. The doctor and the priest were flabbergasted. The attorney just smiled and said, "Professional courtesy."

What does that have in common with the gospel? Other than my simply wanting to tell it for a long time, it doesn't have much connection with the gospel, except someone had to have the courage to put their life on the line, which Jesus did, and the sharks didn't get out of the way for him because they were out to get him.

Today's gospel does not tell us who the Baptist was addressing when he gave his testimony about Jesus. Perhaps it's us he is talking to. He begins by telling us Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The image of "lamb" was a very rich image for the Jews. It spoke of the paschal lamb that was sacrificed at Passover and was the main part of the Passover dinner when the Jews celebrated their liberation from slavery and their special covenant with God. It could also refer to the servant of God whom Isaiah writes about who was led like a lamb to the slaughter or a sheep before the shearers in his passion. (Is. 53,7) Any of these concepts could apply to Jesus.

The Baptist said Jesus was "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Notice the word "sin." When we recite or sing the "Lamb of God" before Communion, we say he takes away the "sins" of the world. The singular word "sin" is used as a description of the general state the world finds itself in. Poverty, war, injustice, hatred, dishonesty, killings, sexual perversion, greed, unnecessary suffering, etc. Our sins (plural) are expressions of our participation in the sinful environment we live in. On the other hand, our good actions are expressions of the kingdom of God Christ came to establish. I just had a long discussion with a friend who couldn't understand how Christ frees us from sin. This is a major area of study in theology which I cannot get into today. Thinking back on the conversation I had with my friend, it struck me that part of our difficulty in understanding how Christ saved us from sin is that we tend not to see how sin affects us, to what extent it is part of the world we live in, and how we participate in it. It's like living in a bubble. A bubble is invisible to those who live inside it. People have experienced this with the technology bubble and more recently with the real estate bubble. Jesus came to us that by his life and teaching, his death and resurrection, he could lead us from a world of sin into God's kingdom, where there would be no more suffering or sadness or evil of any kind and where we would know peace, love and joy for all eternity.

Last week when Jesus came to be baptized, we heard the Baptist tell Jesus, "I need to be baptized by you and yet you are coming to me?" Today the Baptist gives testimony to that event. He saw the Spirit come down on Jesus and remain on him. I think the Baptist thought he knew Jesus and knew Jesus was holier than he was, that's why he didn't feel worthy to baptize Jesus. But through the signs that took place when Jesus was baptized, the Baptist came to know Jesus much more profoundly: that he was the one to take away the sin of the world, the one to initiate God's kingdom, the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit. So he could say in truth, "I did not know him." John realized his mission to prepare for Jesus' coming, was now to make him known to Israel which, if we read the passages that follow today's reading, we will see him doing.

I was thinking this morning of those who had the role of the Baptist in my life, my parents, teachers, my confessor, the members of the Third Order of St. Francis, and the many dedicated lay people I have met in my ministry. I have probably been influenced as much or even more by wonderful faith-filled lay people than I have been by clerics and religious. I'm not putting down religious vocations because religious have definitely touched my life, but I mention the importance of lay people because we all are called to make Christ known to others, and my faith would not be half of what it is without their influence.

And so, the Baptist gives his testimony about Jesus to us today. May we not be shy in sharing our faith in Jesus with others. Amen.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

January 23, 2011

INTRODUCTION: (Isaiah 8,23-9,3; I Corinthians 1,10-13.17; Matthew 4,12-23)

Galilee is located about 75 miles north of Jerusalem. With cars and expressways, that's not very far at all. Since most people traveled on foot at the time of Jesus, it took a few days to make a 75 mile trip. Consequently, Galilee was often forgotten or looked down upon by the religious leaders in Jerusalem. Seven hundred years before Christ, the Assyrians conquered Galilee. Those Jews they didn't kill were sent into exile. The Assyrians did this to all nations they conquered, thus preventing conquered nations from regrouping and rebelling against them. The Assyrians moved a lot of pagans into Galilee to replace the Jews they exiled. In Jesus' time, seven hundred years later, there were still a lot of pagans living there as well as Jews who had moved back, so the population was pretty well mixed.

The prophet Isaiah, who was living in Jerusalem at the time the Assyrians conquered Galilee, foresaw good things for that area in spite of all the devastation the Galileans suffered. Isaiah said a great light would shine upon Galilee that would bring them abundant joy. If our first reading from Isaiah sounds familiar, it's probably because we just heard it a month ago. It was part of our first reading on Christmas. St. Matthew, in today's gospel, tells us Jesus' ministry in Galilee was the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. It would have been normal for a religious teacher like Jesus to do his preaching and teaching mainly in Jerusalem. (Joachim Jeremias pg 242) Jesus, however, chose to begin his ministry in Galilee. In these readings Galilee is called by the names of two of the tribes of Israel that originally settled there: Zebulun and Naphtali.

HOMILY:

A U.S. Congressman died and went to heaven. "Welcome," said St. Peter. "We seldom see Congressmen here." Then St. Peter explained, "This is how things work here. You'll spend one day in hell and one day in heaven, and then you will have to choose where you want to spend eternity." When the Congressman went to hell, he saw a golf course, clubhouse, and politician friends. They dined and reminisced. Their host, the devil, seemed very pleasant. The next day the Congressman returned to heaven where he saw many contented souls playing musical instruments and singing. "It's time to choose eternity," St. Peter said. The Congressman reflected and chose hell. Back in hell, the Congressman saw a barren land full of garbage, fire and smoke, and his friends in rags. A smiling devil greeted him. The Congressman protested, "yesterday there was golf, lobster, champagne, and great times. What happened?" The devil replied, "yesterday we were campaigning... today you voted." (from The Joyful Noiseletter, June-July 2008, pg. 2) Be sure to vote for heaven. I think the devil, the father of lies as Jesus calls him, tries to convince people not that hell is fun, but that there is no such place. If that were true, then all of Jesus' warnings and work to bring us into God's kingdom would be meaningless - if we're all going to end up there anyway!

Today we hear the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Some scholars believe that originally Jesus was a follower of John the Baptist. Eventually the Baptist allowed Jesus to work

independently, preaching and baptizing in the southern part of Israel near Judea while the Baptist moved north into Galilee. Then when Herod Antipas put John in prison, which is a long story in itself, Jesus replaced him in Galilee. St. Matthew sees this as a fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah that the people in Galilee will see a great light. Matthew tells us Jesus began his teaching with the same message of John the Baptist: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of heaven or the kingdom of God is a basic mission if not the basic mission of Jesus. This year in Cycle A we hear mostly from St. Matthew's gospel and we will notice that Matthew prefers to use the expression, "the kingdom of heaven," whereas the other three Gospels use the phrase, "the kingdom of God." Both phrases mean the same thing. It could be that Matthew was being extra-sensitive about not using the word God. Jews never spoke God's name and Matthew seems to be going even further and chooses almost all the time to say the kingdom of heaven. Another word for kingdom would be rule or reign, so whenever we hear the phrase "the kingdom of heaven," Jesus is talking about the reign of God. Exactly what that means is not easy to define in a few words. It refers more to an action: that God is ruling powerfully as King. This is by far an oversimplification but it will help us understand it a little better if we consider four major principles that characterize it: 1) there are good and evil forces in the world, 2) the evil forces rule the present time, 3) God will intervene in a powerful way in history, overthrow the forces of evil and establish his good kingdom and 4) the kingdom is imminent.

We need to point out that God is not a fearsome, remote deity but a divine king who delights in being a loving father, a father who rejoices over gathering his lost children to himself. This concept of the coming reign of God is reflected in all that Jesus did and taught. Another word for this expectation of God reclaiming God's rightful place in the world as its ruler and savior is apocalyptic. In this sense Jesus is an apocalyptic preacher/prophet who not only calls us to repent and prepare for the kingdom which is near but who also brings this kingdom into existence.

Right away Jesus begins to gather those who would help him in this work. All of them are not named in today's passage, but the number 12 is important. Remember there were 12 patriarchs who fathered the twelve tribes of Israel. This symbolizes that Jesus is establishing a new Israel, the new people of God who would be faithful to God. Notice that Jesus is not one of the 12. He is over and above all his 12 apostles and over the entire kingdom he has come to proclaim. In time Jesus needed more than 12 special leaders to help him proclaim the coming of God's good kingdom and God's love. Jesus still needs people to help share in that work. He even told us to pray that the Lord of the harvest would send workers into his harvest. Our Archbishop has asked each parish to pray weekly for this intention. For a few years now we have been praying the prayer of Pope John Paul II for vocations at our holy hours. Following the desire of our Lord and of our Archbishop that we pray for vocations, I am going to pray this prayer after the Communion prayer. Soon we will have copies of the prayer for everyone so that you can all join in.

When it came time for Jesus to leave this world, he said he would return in glory. People throughout the ages have anticipated when this might be. Throughout the past 2000 years, as

often as someone predicted when Jesus would return, they have been wrong. The latest expectation is that the Mayan calendar is supposed to tell us the world will end on 12/21/2012. Jesus told us no one knows. He told us to not go running around looking for it to happen for it will come when we least expect it. What we need to do is to believe that God's good kingdom will triumph in the end. We will share in that victory if we stay close to Jesus and if we are always prepared.

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time - A Cycle

January 30, 2011

INTRODUCTION:

The day of the Lord would be a day of liberation for God's people and a day of judgment for God's enemies and the enemies of God's people. It would be a day of doom and destruction or a day of joy. It all depended where a person stood with God. It didn't matter whether a person belonged to the "chosen people," what did matter is how they lived. Our first reading is from the prophet Zephaniah who lived during a time of colossal change and shifts of world power. Assyria's hold on the Middle East was crumbling and Babylon was swiftly asserting its strength and would soon destroy Assyria. The long 50 plus year reign of Manasseh had just ended with his death. As king in Jerusalem and descendant of David, he brought into the Temple pagan worship, human sacrifice and sacred prostitution. His son, Amon, was assassinated after two years and so his son Josiah was installed as king at the age of eight. Josiah led a reform that brought people back to the God of Israel. As you can see, it was a time of great upheaval during the time of Zephaniah. It is a short reading telling us in the first verse "perhaps" those who are humble and who observe God's law would survive the day of the Lord's anger. The rest of the passage is God's promise to bless the humble and the lowly who take refuge in him.

HOMILY:

A wealthy man, who rarely went to church, was on his deathbed and sent for the pastor. "Pastor," he said, "you know I've never cared much for church matters but I'm about to die, and I want to be sure of my eternal salvation. Do you suppose that if I gave \$1 million to the church, and \$100,000 to you personally, I would go to heaven?" The pastor thought about that idea for a second or two and then replied, "well, sir, I can't say for sure, but what do you have to lose? It's worth a try!" (Joyful Noiseletter, February, 2005, pg. 2)

If that had been me I would love to have been able to say that would work for the man for sure, but in all honesty I would have had to answer like the pastor in the story. Our Lord expects more from us. Today we begin the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus begins to lay out what he does expect of us. The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five major sections of St. Matthew's gospel dedicated to Jesus' teachings. It is not necessarily a sermon Jesus preached from beginning to end. It is made up of many things Jesus taught on other occasions, which Matthew chose, as the writer of the gospel, to put together in this form as one sermon. I want to stress this is one of

five sections Matthew gives us of Jesus' teaching; thus this one sermon is not everything Jesus taught. Matthew makes a point of Jesus preaching on a mountain. He seeks to present Jesus as a new Moses, who proclaimed God's law to God's people on a mountain. However, Jesus is greater than Moses proclaiming a new and greater law from the source of divine revelation.

Last week we heard Jesus in the gospel calling people to "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Remember "kingdom of heaven" means "reign of God." It was an apocalyptic message. The apocalyptic viewpoint is that God would come in some cataclysmic way at some future time to bring judgment and punishment on those who live evil lives and to bring reward to those who live good lives. It is essentially the "Day of the Lord" I spoke of before the first reading. The beatitudes are part of that apocalyptic message. Those who are poor in spirit are those who recognize their own weakness, their own dependence, their own indebtedness to God for everything. In other words, those who are humble and who know how much they need God, theirs is the kingdom of heaven (partially now - fully in the future). Those who think they can make it through life without God will, unhappily, get what they desire - having to continually make it on their own without God (unless they repent). Those who mourn will have things turned around for them and their sorrow will be turned into joy. The meek and those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (holiness) will have their needs met. The merciful, the clean of heart, the peacemakers will be rewarded and those persecuted for their good lives will gain the kingdom. God will turn the tables on everyone someday, whenever that day of the Lord comes.

"Apocalypse" means "revelation." Jesus is, as he begins his ministry, revealing what is to be. What is to be is that God will be faithful to those who desire him and who are faithful to him. The disciple who is mourning or who is being persecuted or who is crying out for God's help may not feel especially blessed; but he or she is blessed because they have God's loving presence and consolation with them now, and they have the hope of the blessedness to come. To be part of the kingdom God offers us, we must prepare as we heard Jesus say last week. We must do the things he has asked of us, things we will hear as we read further in the Sermon on the Mount over the next several weeks. We gather together now in prayer trusting in him who invites us to follow him into God's kingdom. Amen.