

JANUARY 13, 2013: BAPTISM OF JESUS

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Acts 10:34-38 Luke 3:15-16. 21-22

Probably most of us won't find out God's exact plan for us until we eventually meet God face to face. Yet, I presume the longer we live the more we catch glimpses of that plan. That appears to be the case with many of our biblical prophets.

The prophet's biblical call is always the last part of a prophetic book to be written. Only after years of carrying out their God-given ministries are some of these special people able to make sense out of their work.

This certainly applies to Deutero-Isaiah. The first part of today's reading contains his initial reflection on his call. Referred to as the First Song of the Suffering Servant, it'll eventually be followed by two others, and end with a fourth reflection which his followers put together after his death. As in all such calls, there's something "generic." In this case, Deutero-Isaiah's called to be a prophet, someone who has Yahweh's spirit. But he's also called to exercise that ministry in a very unique way. Deutero-Isaiah's a prophet like none before him. He's not to imitate the "in-your-face" style which many of his prophetic predecessors employed. He doesn't cry out nor shout, doesn't make his voice heard in the street. He's extremely low key. And instead of withering his audience with his oracles, he tries to build them up. "A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench."

But more important, the message he proclaims will reach far beyond the exiled Israelites he addresses. "He shall bring justice to the nations The coastlands will wait for his teaching." Nations and coastlands are Jewish words for non-Jews. His ministry will eventually provide faith insights to people who know nothing of the 613 laws of Moses. (I presume most of you who benefit from Isaiah 40-55 are Gentiles.) Deutero-Isaiah's words will affect more people than he could ever reach in his lifetime.

In a parallel way, the earliest followers of Jesus eventually began to understand that the reform of Judaism which he preached was reaching far beyond Judaism. That realization is one of the reasons Luke composed his Acts of the Apostles. He was trying to show how a religious movement which began 100% Jewish in the early 30s, was rapidly becoming 100% Gentile by the mid-80s. Of course, the evangelist presumes the hand of God played the decisive role in this unforeseen development, prompting Peter not only to go to the Gentile Cornelius' house but to eventually baptize everyone there. But it was far easier for Luke, writing almost 50 years after Peter's ministry, to understand the implications of Cornelius' conversion than it was for first generation Jewish Christians. (In Acts, Peter was later "called on the carpet" for his actions by the Jerusalem Christian "authorities.") It took a long time before almost everyone agreed with Peter's statement, "God shows no partiality."

Likewise, Luke's community would have understood the implications of Jesus' baptism in a far deeper way than those standing around the Galilean carpenter at the Jordan on the day it actually took place. Following Raymond Brown's lead, I remind you that scriptural annunciations are for the author's readers, not for the people who biblically receive them. Our sacred authors create annunciations to convey meaning which he or she have only surfaced after much reflection. When Luke's Jesus, for instance, hears the voice from heaven proclaim, "You are my beloved son; with you I am well pleased!" it's important to remember that it's much easier for us to surface divinity in Jesus than it would have been for those who historically came into contact with him. Perhaps one of the most anticipated rewards of getting into heaven just might be the discovery of what we were actually doing here on earth.

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JANUARY 20, 2013: SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 62:1-5 I Corinthians 12:4-11 John 2:1-11

A mark of an old-time Catholic is that even after the age of 50 he or she can still recite by heart the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit they learned before Confirmation: understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, wisdom, piety and fear of the Lord. Ever wonder where you find these specific seven in the Christian Scriptures? You don't! Six of the seven are in chapter 11 of Isaiah. (Piety was added to round off the perfect biblical seven.) In their original context they're characteristics not of the perfect follower of Jesus, but of the perfect Jewish king!

Compare these seven with Paul's nine gifts of the Spirit comprising today's I Corinthians pericope: wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, mighty deeds, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues, interpretation of tongues. Quite a different list.

Eventually Paul's nine were squeezed out by Isaiah's seven. Why? The latter are relatively harmless; the former can create huge problems for any community. Most of Isaiah's gifts are directed to the individuals who have them; for their personal spiritual development. Paul's gifts, on the other hand, are geared to building up a vibrant community of believers. One can be an admirable individualist by cultivating Isaiah's seven. But one can't be a participating member of the body of Christ without zeroing in on Paul's nine. It's evident the switch in gifts came about because of a change in "ecclesiology" - the way one looks at the church. As Avery Dulles pointed out in his classic book *Models of the Church*, how we conceive of the church determines what we do in the church. Historians constantly remind us that first century ecclesiology was regrettably replaced with fourth century ecclesiology. Christianity went from being a horizontal, equalitarian community of God's people to a lateral, hierarchical institution, structured from the top down, similar to the Roman Empire.

We have no idea what Jesus' first miracle was. Each evangelist uses Jesus' initial miracle as a device to set the theme of his gospel. Changing water into wine at Cana in Galilee is John's first "sign" because, throughout his gospel, John attempts to demonstrate how Christianity replaces Judaism as God's way of living our lives.

Notice Jesus tells the waiters to fill not the empty wine jugs, but the purification jugs with water. According to Jewish law, once those specific containers are contaminated with wine, they can no longer be used for Jewish ritual washings. The noted Johannine scholar C. H. Dodd described the scene perfectly: "John's Jesus replaces the water of Judaism with the wine of Christianity." The evangelist was convinced that anything Judaism could do, Christianity could do better. His gospel is filled with such "replacement" theology.

I presume Jesus' first followers were convinced they somehow were involved in Third-Isaiah's vision of a rebuilt Jerusalem, and a rebuilt faith. But because of their added commitment to Jesus' vision of God's kingdom, they also realized they'd have to replace the prophet's idea of Yahweh alone bringing future glory to the Chosen People with a determination to become the body of the risen Christ. Instead of just applauding as God works, they'd have to do much of the work themselves - with the help of the Holy Spirit.

But, as I mentioned above, there's a problem: the same gifts which create that body can also be the forces which tear that body apart, as was happening in Corinth. Over the next two Sundays, Paul will both reinforce the necessity of being the body of Christ and show how those gifts can be employed to build and not tear down.

Of course, if we don't first buy into Paul's idea of church as the body of Christ, it won't make a lot of sense even to listen to those readings.

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