

Second Sunday of the Year January 15, 2017

Readings: Isaiah 49:3, 5-6 1 Corinthians 1:1-3 John 1:29-34

Today we begin the ordinary season of the year. Today's readings tell us about the identity of Jesus, who he is and what his mission is. We need to know who Jesus is and understand his mission if we want to be his true disciples. A disciple is one who knows and understands the master and follows him closely. Every good disciple is also an apostle who proclaims the good news of the master. In the Gospel of today we have John the Baptist fulfilling his role as a witness and proclaiming to people that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. The lamb is the symbol of gentleness, sacrifice and triumph. The lamb is said to be a harmless animal and is so innocent that it will even lick the hand that is raised to slaughter it. Jesus is that gentle and humble person, who said that he is truly meek and humble of heart. The first reading connected with the Gospel of today tells us of the mysterious servant of God. God himself has chosen him from all eternity and has sent him on a mission. His life sums up the great figures of the past but his mission lies in the future. In the second reading Paul explains what it means to give witness to Jesus. He reminds the Corinthians of his apostolic calling and blesses them with the grace and peace of God, grace that speaks of the goodness of God and peace which comes as the fruit of the salvific mission of Christ, giving them reconciliation, forgiveness and harmony. He reminds them of their special call to be saints.

Today's First Reading from the Book of Isaiah presents us with a part of the second of the Servant Songs, this one being addressed to the Gentile nations. The Lord expressed His love for Israel, indicating that through that nation, He the Lord would be glorified. Through Israel, the grace of God would shine forth worldwide. Serving God is something essential, which Israel had to learn to do. God has called Israel to be his Servant and already he was in his mother's womb he formed him as his servant to gather his people to him. The Lord prophesied that He would bring tribes of Jacob back to Him, uniting them with Israel in order that both people may be grouped as one. Israel knows that its true strength is found in God. Such spiritual insight will lead to restoration for the people. Not only does Israel accept the title servant, it also understands that service to God has always been its calling. The people will return to the Promised Land from all places to which they had been scattered because of their sin and ignorance. Now God affirms Israel's newfound devotion to service and even advances its mission to include more than leading home its survivors. He grants Israel the distinct privilege of becoming a

beacon of light for all nations. The servant Israel will teach the world the advantages of faith so that all may enjoy the gift of salvation from God.

The Second Reading of today taken from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians affirms that it is the Divine Will that all His people be united. Through him who is the chosen apostle of Jesus, the Church of Corinth was urged to be united to each other. Here Paul emphasizes the fact that by virtue of their Baptism into Christ whom God had made our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption, the faithful are called to be saints, called to be holy and are united with all who call upon the name of the Lord. By their admission into the Body of Christ through faith in Jesus and the Sacrament of Baptism, the faithful are a priestly kingdom and a holy nation just as Israel was a holy nation by Divine election. In Christ, the faithful become the people of God, forming a sacred assembly, the community of God. This truth is further affirmed by the words of Paul that they be united with all those who call on his name. To call on the name of the Lord as seen in the Old Testament is an expression of unity in adoration. Speaking to the Church of Corinth Paul emphasized that the local faith community must be united together with all those of the universal Church. This call for unity was necessary because of the division that existed in the Christian community of Corinth. The believers were called to be united with both their Lord and with one another. Further, the unity of the faithful was identified by their common adoration of Christ. He concludes with the statement that the grace and peace from God the Father and Lord Jesus be with them.

In the Gospel of today we have the first appearance of Jesus in public but he does not speak out his message. We see him simultaneously in the role of Lord and Servant. The Gospels tell us that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist at the river Jordan. As Jesus approached the place, John announced to some of his own disciples: "There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." However, the focus today is on John the Baptist and the revelation he provides about Jesus. John identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God, who has come to remove the sins of the world. This passage may indicate some reference of the Passover meal as given in the book of Exodus which ultimately led to the freedom of the people of Israel from the hands of the Egyptians. In the Gospel of John, the term sin does not refer to the individual action of humans. It refers to the larger experience of human beings alienated from God and from one another. When John speaks about Jesus he announces that he is the new Lamb that brings freedom to the people of God and liberation from the oppression of evil and sin. He will sacrifice himself to die on the cross to take away the sins of humankind and

liberate the humanity. It is no coincidence therefore that the sacrificial death of Jesus took place at the Passover feast. He is the new Pasch; he is the Lamb who both sacrifices himself for us. John clearly indicates that he is the Lamb of God and the Servant of God. As prophet Isaiah says that he is the Lamb that was taken to slaughter as a sacrifice to Yahweh. Because he is our Lord, he can take away our sins; because he is a servant, he sacrifices his life for us.

In today's Gospel John the Baptist is presented to us as a prophet proclaiming the Kingdom of God and calling the people to repentance. But Jesus precedes John in dignity and stature because, even before John was conceived in his mother's womb, Jesus, the Word of God, already existed. John also tells people that he is not the messiah but he is the one who prepares the way of the messiah who is to come. He also tells them that after him comes a person who ranks ahead of him because he existed before him. He also accepts that he did not have any previous knowledge of him. Yet he was given the sign through divine revelation that the Holy Spirit would come down from Heaven and remain with Jesus, the chosen one. John accepts the greatness of Jesus and says he is not even worthy to untie the laces of his shoes. John now points out to Jesus and tells his disciples that he is the messiah and encourages his disciples to follow him. Jesus is presented to us not only as the servant of God but also as a friend who loves all and is ready to sacrifice his life to save all.

The Baptism of John the Baptist as presented in John and unlike in the Synoptic Gospels is not for the forgiveness of sins. Its purpose is to reveal Jesus to Israel as the messiah. Again we notice the strong superiority of Jesus over John the Baptist. There is also a reference to Jesus having existed before John, which serves to connect Jesus with the understanding of preexistence which is expressed in the prologue of John. Preexistence is the unique way of expressing the relationship of Jesus with God, a relationship that existed even before the creation of the world. However, the way John recognizes Jesus is through the descent of the Spirit in the form of a dove. The symbol of dove refers to the Book of Genesis chapter 8, where the dove is shown as the sign of new creation. The Spirit will remain with Jesus throughout his life and his ministry. The term remain is specially used by John to mean abide, which signifies a kind of intimate mutual relationship that existed between God the Father and his Son and which will later be shared by the Son with his disciples. Here it signifies the permanent presence of the Spirit with Jesus. With this testimony John withdraws himself completely as he has fulfilled the task he was called upon to do.

In this Gospel passage John is giving witness to the three titles of Jesus. In the first title he calls him the Greater One, the person who existed before him. His response is that Jesus must increase and he, John must decrease. The second title under which John saw Jesus can be called as the Vehicle of Holy Spirit. Here John sees the Spirit coming as a dove and the spirit will be instrumental in the baptism of Jesus. The third title is God's chosen one, the person set apart, recognizing the special mission of Jesus. But the most precious of the titles and at the same time a strange title is when John calls Jesus as the Lamb of God. The word Lamb refers back to the origins of the great Jewish feast of the Passover. According to the Israelite history, God had been urging the Pharaoh to let God's people leave Egypt. There had been a series of plagues in Egypt and each time Pharaoh broke his promise to liberate them. The final and most terrible plague involved the slaying of every firstborn child in Egypt on the day of the Passover. In order that the Israelites might not be punished, they were told to smear the doorposts of their houses with the blood of a lamb. When God's angel struck, he passed over the blood-painted houses of the Israelites and their children were spared. They had, in effect, been saved by the blood of the lamb painted on the door posts. The lamb indeed becomes the sign and symbol of the liberation of God's people from slavery and oppression. On the night before the Israelites left, under the leadership of Moses, they had a final meal which included the eating of a roast lamb. This was the Passover meal.

The readings of today tell us that if we want to be the disciples of Jesus we must first find out who he really is for us. Jesus the Lamb of God uniquely relates God and human beings. Peter and the disciples identified him as the Son of God and in him they found the security and eternal life. He was their support and strength. Down the centuries human beings have looked at Jesus to see the kind and loving face of God. God the creator of the universe looks at Jesus his son with love and in him we see that compassionate divine face. Today as we reflect on his word and discover him in this world we need to know what his mission is, if we want to be his good disciples. Every disciple of Jesus is a true follower of the master and is also an apostle who carries the good news to all. The Christian disciple not only follows the Gospel of Jesus but also helps others to hear and accept it also and practices it in his life. When we experience this Light in the very Person of Christ, we see the face of God shining in every human being. We are enlightened by the fact that God has joined every human being to Himself in the Incarnation. We are enlightened by the fact that no matter what the appearance or circumstances of a person's life may be—age, size, shape, wealth or poverty, health or sickness, social status, level of dependency or functioning, life is always a good. It is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory. Let

us pray that God will help us to work together with Jesus to establish his Kingdom in the whole world and especially in that part of it where we live out our lives. As we gather around the table of the Eucharist we ask the grace from the Lord to be filled with his love, peace and joy that come to us from God our Father through Jesus Christ.

One night a man had a dream. He dreamt that he was walking along the beach with God. As he looked up at the sky, he saw all the scenes of his life flash by along with two sets of footprints: one set of himself and another of God. As he looked carefully at those steps he noticed something quite disturbing: sometimes there were two sets of footprints and at other times, particularly at the most difficult times in his life, he saw only one set of them. This deeply troubled the man, so he turned and said to God: "Lord, you said that if I followed you, then you would always walk with me through thick and thin, in all my difficulties and joys. In looking back, I see that during the most painful times there is only one set of footprints. Why did you leave me when I needed you the most?" He heard the voice of God who said, "My child, I love you and would never leave you alone. It was during those difficult times you see one set of steps and that is the time when you suffered the most that I carried you in my arms.

One of the greatest violinists of all time was named Niccolò Paganini. He was born in 1782 and he enjoyed a well-known and memorable career before his death in 1840. One day as Paganini was about to perform before a packed opera house, he suddenly discovered that he had walked out on stage with the wrong violin. What he was holding was not his valued instrument but one that belonged to someone else. His cherished violin was made by the master violin maker, Guarneri. Paganini was horrified and panic-stricken but knowing that he had no other choice, he began to play with all of the skill that he possessed. Everyone agreed, after the performance, that he had given a performance of a lifetime. When he finished his concert, the audience gave him a standing ovation. After the concert, in his dressing room, he was praised and commended for his marvelous performance, Paganini replied, "Today, I learned the most important lesson in my entire career. Before today, I thought the music was in my violin but today I learned that the music is in me."

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