

BAPTISM OF THE LORD — B

READING I Is 42:1-4, 6-7

READING II Acts 10:34-38

GOSPEL Mk 1:7-11

The first reading is the first of four Suffering Servant Songs of Isaiah (42:1-4). Plus, an addition which describes the role of the Servant. (vv 6-7). Although discussed below, v 5 of the addition is edited out of the reading at Mass. The Servant is not a historical but an ideal figure who represents the best of Israel. He is a "corporate personality." As the song opens, the Lord is speaking to the people of Israel, announcing his plan to send the Servant to the nations. The Lord describes the Servant as his intimate, "his chosen one." To enable the Servant to execute his mission of announcing God's will to the nations, God endows him with his special power and presence ("my spirit"). In performing his mission, the Servant does not manipulate people by force or coercion. He respects the poor and the helpless ("bruised reed," "smoldering wick"). The song concludes with a reference to the pagan nations ("the coastlands"). They await the message of the Servant with anxiety and enthusiasm.

Without denying the Servant's mission to the nations, the author of the addition (vv 5-7) stresses the Servant's role for Israel. The Servant is also the covenant of the people. Like Moses, he is to bring his people out of slavery (the world of darkness) into the light and, therefore, to the peaceful possession of the land. As v 5 indicates, this deliverance is part of God's ongoing creation. In a manner similar to the first creation (Gn 2:7), God will communicate new life to his people.

The section in Acts is Peter's discourse at Caesarea to the household of the pagan Cornelius. Actually, Luke is directing this proclamation to his Christian readers, explaining that one does not have to become a Jew to be saved. God cannot be manipulated by bribes. People like Cornelius, who fear God and practice righteousness, are acceptable to God. In vv 36-38, Luke seems to reflect the early kerygma (church teaching). "The Good News proclaimed through Jesus Christ" alludes to Is 52:7, where the herald brings Good News of salvation to Jerusalem. Luke directs his audience to the start of the early Christian preaching in Galilee after the baptism preached by John. "God anointed him with the Holy Spirit" refers to Is 61:1, which Luke develops in the scene at Nazareth; "The spirit of the Lord is upon me ..." (Lk 4:18). This anointing with the Spirit is demonstrated by his good works and healings.

In Mark, the Baptist attests that he is not worthy to function as the slave of the "more powerful" one. Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark omits a summary of the Baptist's ethical preaching in order to focus on his status as precursor. It is likely that John regarded Jesus' preaching as one of imminent judgment ("fire" in Mt 3:11-12; Lk 3:16-17),

although in Mark, the Baptist does not preach judgment. The judgment-oriented spirit was eventually associated with the outpouring of the Spirit in the wake of Jesus' exaltation.

Mark's description of the baptism is less tendentious than Matthew's and Luke's. After John plunges Jesus into the Jordan, Jesus alone receives a unique revelation from the Father. The rending of the sky is linked with Is 63:7 ff., where the prophet begs the Lord to rend the heavens and come down. Although not totally clear, the dove may also be an image of the people of God (2 Esdras 5:21-27).

The Spirit is the divine power that comes upon Jesus in view of his prophetic mission. This last verse refers to Is 42:1, the first Suffering Servant Song. Like the Servant, Jesus is a prophet. However, Jesus is also God's Son. (The Greek word for "servant" can also be translated "son.") Unlike Matthew and Luke, Mark does not introduce the moment of sonship at the conception. Instead, the baptism is that Christological moment when Jesus is declared God's Son. Mark connects this disclosure with Jesus' acceptance of his mission to establish the final and definitive people of God.

Let my Spirit go. We receive different gifts, but we cling to them as only our own. We acquire various talents, but we grasp them tenaciously only for ourselves. We accumulate many of this world's goods yet hoard them for ourselves. We cannot break free of the centripetal force of our ego. It is difficult to say: Let my Spirit go.

The Servant receives God's spirit for his prophetic office. He respects the poor and the helpless, he brings forth justice. He leads his people out of darkness and prepares to bring his message to the pagans. Therefore, both Israel and the nations benefit from the spirit-filled execution of his office. For the Servant, the proper lifestyle is: Let my Spirit go.

For Mark, the Spirit comes on Jesus at the moment of the baptism. The rending of the sky and perhaps the dove suggest the establishment of the definitive people of God. The private revelation from the Father points in the direction of Jesus' mission. The Spirit is to move Jesus in providing for his people. The Spirit, then, is ultimately for others. For Jesus the only modus vivendi is: Let my Spirit go.

Husbands and wives who continue to deepen their mutual love communicate the Spirit. The single person who looks beyond his or her own needs to the larger woes of humanity release the Spirit. All those who insist on justice for everyone breathe forth the Spirit. All those who reject the injustice of racism and see all as God's children embrace the Spirit. For these and similar people the only approach to life is: Let my Spirit go.

Eucharist links the role of the Spirit and Jesus' dutiful discharge of his office. Eucharist releases the Spirit to bring about the presence of Jesus, who found life by giving himself

in death. Eucharist urges the community in turn to release that same Spirit by its self-giving. In Eucharist, the only adequate stance is: Let my Spirit go.