

A reading from the book of the prophet Isaiah.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

The Lord said to me,
“You are my servant, Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”
And now the Lord says,
who formed me in the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honoured in the sight of the Lord,
and my God has become my strength.
He says,
“It is too small a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”



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 02

A reading from the first letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians.

Pause – and look up at the assembly

From Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus
by the will of God,
and our brother Sosthenes.
To the Church of God that is in Corinth,
to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus,
called to be saints,
together with all those who in every place
call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,
both their Lord and ours:
Grace to you and peace from God our Father
and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Sosthenes = SAHS-thuh-neeZ

Corinth = KAW-rinh

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 02

The Lord be with you.

And with your spirit.

A reading from the holy gospel according to John.

Glory to you, O Lord

John the Baptist saw Jesus coming toward him
and declared,
“Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!
This is he of whom I said,
‘After me comes a man who ranks ahead of me
because he was before me.’
I myself did not know him;
but I came baptizing with water for this reason,
that he might be revealed to Israel.”
And John testified,
“I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove,
and remain on him.
I myself did not know him,
but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me,
‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain
is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’
And I myself have seen and have testified
that this is the Son of God.”



The GOSPEL of the LORD.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURE IN DEPTH

Reading I: Isaiah 49:3, 5-6

The readings for this Sunday continue the theme of Jesus' servanthood and its manifestation in the baptism. This accounts for the selection of the first reading, the second of the servant songs in Second Isaiah.

When we compare the second servant song with the first, which we read last week, we note two points of difference. First, the second song states that God formed his servant "from the womb." This consciousness of predestination is characteristic of the Hebrew prophets (see Jer 1:5) and recurs in Paul (see Gal 1:15).

Such an idea of predestination must not be allowed to harden into an abstract dogma but must be allowed to remain what it is in the Bible—a doxological expression of faith in a concrete situation. It is this fact that expresses itself in the annunciation and infancy narratives of the Gospels.

The second point to notice is the enhanced emphasis on the universal scope of the servant's mission. The first song simply included the phrase "a light to the nations." The second expands on this. "It is too light a thing" for the servant's mission to be confined to Israel: "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth."

Responsorial Psalm 40:2, 4, 7-8, 8-9, 10

This is a personal psalm of thanksgiving for deliverance from tribulation. The psalmist is determined to give thanks not only with his lips but also in his life. He offers his will in obedience to the will of God. This, he says, is what God desires, not sacrifice and burnt offerings or sin offerings.

While this looks like a total repudiation of all cultic sacrifice, we have to remember that this psalm was recited precisely as an accompaniment to the offering of just that—a cultic sacrifice. What the author must mean is that self-oblation must accompany cultic sacrifice, not that the latter must be abandoned in favor of the former.

Yet, as the author of the letter to the Hebrews perceived (Heb 10:5-10), this critique of cultic sacrifices points forward to their abolition by Christ's own sacrifice of himself in perfect obedience to the Father.

The sacrifices of the old covenant were permitted to last for several centuries as a witness not only to their own inadequacy but also to the impossibility of a human being's offering the perfect oblation of his/her will.

It would have been all too Pelagian to suppose that a human being could. So the sacrifices and the prophetic critique of them had to carry on until the appearance of the one true sacrifice.

The use of this psalm in Hebrews sanctions its Christological interpretation, and it is in this sense that it is used in the liturgy today.

This is a song of Christ the servant offering himself in his baptism to a life of total obedience to the Father's will, a life that will lead him to a ministry to the poor and the outcast, the sick and the suffering, culminating on Calvary.

All this will be the subject of the gospel readings in the coming months.

Reading II: 1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Today we begin the reading of extracts from 1 Corinthians in course. Here we have the introductory greeting in the conventional style of all ancient letters: "A to B, greeting."

But, as usual, Paul Christianizes the epistolary convention. He is Paul, "called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus." His addressees are "the Church of God, those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints." And his greeting is a Christian blessing: "Grace and peace."

The most striking feature in this heading, however, is Paul's emphasis on the universality of the Church. He reminds the Corinthians that they are the Church of God "which is at Corinth."

They are the local embodiment of the universal Ecclesia. There can be only one people of God, and each congregation is nothing by itself but is only a manifestation of that one people.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that they are not alone—they are called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and that that Lord is the Lord of those other churches as well as their own.

The Corinthians were engrossed in their own spiritual progress and their own problems. They were congregational in a bad sense, in that they thought they were the whole people of God, living on their own.

A local church can, of course, be congregational in a good sense if it realizes the supreme dignity of its vocation to be the representative and embodiment of the universal Church.

Again and again as Paul takes up point by point the practical and theological problems that beset the Corinthian church, he will trace back their faults to the supreme mistake of identifying their own congregation with the Church catholic, of isolating themselves from the whole body.

Congregationalism in the bad sense is not confined to the denomination that bears that name. In fact, Congregationalists often exhibit Congregationalism in the positive sense. But it is a disease that appears to be endemic to the American religious scene.

It has been attributed to the frontier situation, in which a group of pioneers get together and start a church on their own. In such an atmosphere, it is difficult to foster a sense of the givenness and universality of the Church.

Church seems to be something you get together and start on your own. Hence, it is of great importance to proclaim the true, biblical, Pauline view of the congregation. “It is not that the ekklesia divides up into ekklesiai. Nor does the sum of the ekklesiai produce the ekklesia. The one ekklesia is present in the places mentioned” (K. L. Schmidt).

Gospel: John 1:29-34

This Gospel departs from the normal rule of reading Matthew’s Gospel during series A, presumably because of the importance of Jesus’ baptism to the Epiphany season.

The fourth evangelist avoids a direct narrative of the baptism of Jesus, probably because of claims of the “baptist” sect, which led Matthew to insert the dialogue between Jesus and John, as we saw in last week’s gospel. To narrate Jesus’ baptism would have made him appear too much like the subordinate of John.

This impression the evangelist is at pains to correct, from the prologue on through the early chapters of the Gospel, and not least in the present passage (“a man who ranks before me, for he was before me”).

Instead, the Baptist bears witness to the theological meaning of the baptism as it was expressed in the voice from heaven and in the descent of the dove. The latter is explicitly mentioned (Jn 1:33).

The voice from heaven is clearly alluded to in the words “This is the Son of God,” and perhaps also in the reference to the “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” This too may be an allusion to the identification of Jesus with the servant of YHWH of Second Isaiah.

If we ask what this Johannine account of the meaning of the baptism adds to the synoptic accounts, two points spring to mind.

One is that John makes even clearer than the Synoptists (especially if we follow the variant “elect” in verse 34) that the theological meaning of the baptism is to be sought exclusively in the manifestation of Jesus as the servant of YHWH.

The second point is that Jesus' mission as servant will include his bearing (or taking away) the sin of the world (Is 53). In this way the post-Epiphany season begins to point beyond itself to Passiontide.

Reginald H. Fuller