

HEARERS OF THE WORD

Isaiah 55:1-11; Isaiah 12; 1 John 5:1-9; Mark 1:7-11

You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased

Mark 1:7 [John] proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 8 I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”

9 In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. 10 And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 11 And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

That John the Baptist baptised Jesus is historically certain. As the New Testament unfolds, there is increasing unease with this fact, revealed in the editorial strategies of Matthew, Luke and John. Such unease arose, in part, from the continued existence of followers of John the Baptist right up to the end of the first century. When we link this fact with the other fact, namely, that the timing of Jesus’ own ministry is triggered by the arrest of John the Baptist, then it is safe to conclude that Jesus was a follower of John the Baptist and did not go into the desert just to be baptised. The metaphorical relatedness of the two figures is intriguingly explored by Luke in his first two chapters.

It is important to establish who was John the Baptist. In summary, a prophetic figure, in the mould of the iconic prophet Elijah; he withdrew from the Temple cult into the desert because of the compromised nature of the priesthood; he preached the coming kingdom of God, an experience of judgement; historically, he may or may not have recognised Jesus. (The stories in John 1 are driven by theology not by history.) As a follower, Jesus echoed his mentor’s teaching.



In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matt 3:1–2)

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matt 4:17)

The similarity is obvious. However, whereas John preached *judgement and conversion*, Jesus preached *the good news and conversion*. Finally, Mark 1:8, as it stands, reflects Christian theology. It is likely that John originally used a comparison of water and fire, as follows: I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with fire.” (Mark 1:8)

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground; but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth. So he put out his hand and took it and brought it into the ark with him. He waited another seven days, and again he sent out the

Thought for the day

In all our lives, there are “before and after” moments, whatever they might be (parenthood, marriage, career etc.). In my life as a disciple, can I name any particular “before and after” moments? This probably won’t include baptism, because mostly we were just babies. But later, what happened to bring faith alive and to help me grow up as a believer? Such reflection may help us grasp the significance of John’s baptism for Jesus himself. For him, it was a true “before and after” event, sustained by the ringing affirmation, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Prayer

Father, we are all your beloved sons and daughters; we dare to say that with us too you are well pleased. Help us embrace our new reality by letting ourselves be loved by you. Amen.

dove from the ark; and the dove came back to him in the evening, and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf; so Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days, and sent out the dove; and it did not return to him any more. (Gen 8:8–12)

Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. (Mal 4:5)

I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, “You are my son; today I have begotten you. (Psa 2:7)

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. (Is 42:1)

He said, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” (Gen 22:2)

KIND OF WRITING

The excerpt in the lectionary takes in

two scenes. The first is the presentation of John the Baptist (1:2-8) and the second is the prophetic legitimization of Jesus (1:9-12). In continuity with the biblical tradition, this legitimization is presented as a theophany, with visual and acoustic symbolism.

Note that only Jesus sees and hears the phenomena—and, significantly, the reader. The reader attends to the rest of the story differently on account of this privileged knowledge.

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

(a) John the Baptist turns up a few more times in Mark.

Arrest and death (6:14-29); comparison with Jesus (6:14-15; 8:28); authority of John (11:27-33). There is a fuller picture in Matthew and Luke.

(b) Events in Jesus' life:

Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" (Mark 9:6-8)

Now when the centurion, who stood facing him, saw that in this way he breathed his last, he said, "Truly this man was God's Son!" (Mark 15:39)

ST PAUL

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. (Rom 6:3-4)

For all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:27-29)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 7 "Proclaimed" (whence *kerygma*) is a very important word in the New Testament, especially in Paul. Mark uses it proportionately much more frequently (9-14:9-0+8). In Christian terms, it implies effective proclamation, especially in the ministry of Jesus himself and in the proclamation of Paul. Historically, John the Baptist did look forward to another figure, but with some uncertainty as to

whom (the messiah? God? a prophet? an angel? etc.). That John was unworthy to undertake the most menial task of a slave speaks for itself. Footwear remains the image in Matthew, although there John is not worthy to carry his sandals. Even Mark underscores the inferiority of John to Jesus.

Verse 8 Immersion is common in all religions and in Judaism. The distinctive feature of John's immersion was that it was once off and that it expressed a commitment to his vision and the consequent conversion of heart and life. (Needless to mention, this immersion is to be distinguished from the later Christian baptism.) The original word pair was probably water and fire (see Mt 3:11-12), a more natural contrast and a fitting one for the rather ferocious Baptist. Later Christian experience of Spirit, symbolised by fire, has facilitated the editorial adjustment.

Verse 9 The bare facts are coolly reported here. Clearly, this was a highly significant choice for Jesus and the next few verses interpret the event. Mark has no discussion like that in Matthew, because in this Gospel Jesus identifies with sinners – cf. Is 6:5; 53:12. Isaiah continues to be the influence in the next verses: God's spirit rest upon the prophet (Is 61:1); he is the servant/son (Is 42:1) and the ideal Davidic ruler (Is 11:1-3)

Verse 10 The heavens torn apart: that is, an ecstatic, transcendent experience. It had been generally conceded by then that from the point of view of prophecy and revelation, the heavens were shut. The most one could hope for was an echo of God's voice (the *bat qol*, literally, the daughter of a voice). The sense of vocation and anointing, undoubtedly historical, is expressed symbolically through the Spirit descending. Was it the Spirit like a dove, descending? Or was it, the Spirit descending like a dove? The iconographic tradition privileges the literal, but the metaphorical may be more accurate. Just as the dove signalled the end of the disaster of the flood, here the Spirit, descending on Jesus as he rises from the flood, signals the end of that silence of the closed heavens. The driving force of this Spirit is immediately evident in v.12. The (Holy) Spirit is mentioned a few times in Mark. Just now on the lips of John the Baptist (v. 8); the driver into the desert (1:12); the sin against the Holy Spirit (3:9); the inspiration of Scripture (12:36); the giver of the right words in times of persecution (13:11).

Verse 11 A voice from heaven resembles Dan 4:31, an apocalyptic book. The first words are a citation from Psalm 2:7 (perhaps also Is 41:8 above), an important source for early Christological reflection (Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5; 5:5). The force of "beloved" is often "pertaining to one who is the only one of his or her class, but at the same time is particularly loved and cherished." There is a disturbing echo of Gen 22:2, where Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his beloved son. "Delights" is limited to here in Mark. The echo at the transfiguration is intentional: *Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!"* (Mark 9:7)

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. John gives an example of humility as a person confident in his own role but not seeking to claim to be more than he is. He is able to acknowledge that Jesus is greater. There is a freedom in being able to acknowledge the gifts of others without losing a sense of one's own giftedness. Recall times when you were able to do this.

2. The baptism of Jesus was an extraordinary religious experience for him. Something happened that was a major step forward for Jesus in coming to know that he was *the* beloved Son of God. We all have events in our lives that are milestones along the road of discovering who we are. What have been these milestones for you?

3. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Bring to mind memories of experiences in which you knew you were the beloved (of God or of another person) and that the one who loved you was well pleased. Bring these experiences to mind with gratitude, knowing that the only proper response to love received is thankfulness. Perhaps you have also given that experience to another.

PRAYER

God of salvation, in the river Jordan you bathed your Son Jesus in glory and revealed him as your obedient servant.

In spirit and in power rend the heavens and come down to us. Strengthen us to acknowledge your Christ, that we who are reborn in his likeness may we walk with him in newness of life.

Grant this through Jesus Christ, your Word made flesh, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen.

There are three that testify: the Spirit and the water and the blood

1 John 5:1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the parent loves the child. 2 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. 3 For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome, 4 for whatever is born of God conquers the world. And this is the victory that conquers the world, our faith. 5 Who is it that conquers the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?

1 John 5:6 This is the one who came by water and blood, Jesus Christ, not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one that testifies, for the Spirit is the truth. 7 There are three that testify: 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. 9 If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The insistence upon faith, water, the Spirit and testimony makes this a suitable reading for the feast of the baptism of the Lord. The general insistence across the letter on the true humanity of Jesus makes it also suitable to mark the close of the Christmas season.

CONTEXT IN THE COMMUNITY

Much about this document is disputed: authorship, location, genre and so forth. What is not really disputed is the context. It reflects an early deformation of Christianity which diminished both the humanity and divinity of Jesus. There had been conflict in the community and some had departed / been expelled. It may also be that some regarded themselves to be so spiritual that ethical behaviour somehow no longer mattered. This would account for the repeated tone of exhortation.

KIND OF WRITING

1 John is not exactly a letter and not exactly a homily, but it does exhibit features of both. Many would consider it an “epistolary sermon.”

1:1-4	PROLOGUE
1:5-2:17	Exhortation
2:18-27	Affirmations
2:28-3:24	Exhortations
4:1-6	Affirmations
4:7-5:5	Exhortations
5:6-12	Affirmations
5:13-21	EPILOGUE

In this scheme, the lectionary reading straddles two sections, moving from exhortations to affirmations.

RELATED PASSAGES

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new commandment that is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. (1 John 2:7-8)

All who obey his commandments abide in him, and he abides in them. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us. (1 John 3:24; cf. 4:6, 13.)

When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. (John 15:26)

In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf. (John 8:17-18)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 This is very like Jn 1:12-13; 3:3-5 etc. It is an incomplete syllogism, with the “therefore” part implied, perhaps even triggered within!

Verses 2-3a The author rehearses teaching familiar from the Johannine tradition, with its great emphasis on love of God and of each other. It includes, nevertheless, thoroughly ethical behaviour following the commandments.

Verses 3b-4 Why are the commandments not burdensome? The author reflected on this in 1 John 2:7-8 above. The believer has a different energy, that of victorious faith, through the Spirit.

Verse 5 The faith that is truly victorious believes Jesus to be the Son of God. The high doctrine of the Johannine “school” certainly triggered schisms. Cf. *Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.”* (John 6:68-69) The extreme interpretation of that led to early Docetism, the error that Jesus only seemed (*dokeō*) to be human. The orthodox response is expressed in the simple verb: *he came*, but in the aorist tense, i.e. he came once for all in the incarnation.

Verse 6 Before going straight for a sacramental interpretation of this verse, it is good to remember that in the Fourth Gospel the order is blood and water, i.e. the death of Jesus and the new life flowing from it. Thus it serves to affirm the true humanity of Jesus. At a second remove, the passage then hints—in correct order—at baptism and eucharist. Added to the witness of Jesus’ real death, there is the witness of the Spirit (see the citations above).

Verses 7-8 The witness is powerful because threefold and from God.

Verses 9 Witness/testimony is characteristic Johannine vocabulary: 1-0-1-33 (the Gospel); 6 times in 1 John alone. The verse is an *a fortiori* argument. Not to accept God’s testimony is to treat God as a liar. See Jn 8:17-18 above.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The connecting up of faith, love and obedience is very strong and invites reflection on my own integration of these aspects of discipleship.

2. Both John and Paul teach that total Christian living is possible—once we surrender ourselves fully to the Spirit of the Son. It does put it up to us...

3. All spiritual testimony comes mediated and must be tested. And yet, it must also be a reality for each of us on the journey.

PRAYER

God, our loving parent, help us to love you in each other and so love you and live the greatest commandment.

Send you Holy Spirit that we may know from within the victory of faith and so live lives of courageous witness to Jesus, our brother, the Son of God, who lives and reigns with you and the Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen.

Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live

Isa 55:1 Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. 2 Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. 3 Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live. I will make with you an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David. 4 See, I made him a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander for the peoples. 5 See, you shall call nations that you do not know, and nations that do not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you. 6 Seek the LORD while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; 7 let the wicked forsake their way, and the unrighteous their thoughts; let them return to the LORD, that he may have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. 10 For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there until they have watered the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 11 so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The first reading is an extended, rich invitation to come back to God. A link between the two readings is established by the use of the word “return” in Is 55:7. Return means conversion and repentance, that is *metanoia*.

ORIGIN OF THE READING

Isaiah 40-55, part of the composite book of Isaiah, was written towards the end of the Babylonian Exile (cf. Is 55:12-13).

KIND OF WRITING

This prophetic oracle shows the usual feature of poetic parallelism. Vv. 1-9 are

almost completely in parallel verses with the exception of 5bc. The pleasure of this writing is in the variant expression of the same thought, either with higher literary terms or by more concrete language. Vv. 10-11 vary the pattern a little and constitute a kind of extended parable, using the imagery of rainfall and “automatic” growth. It is one of the most well-remembered passages from the book of Isaiah.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

See the detailed commentary below for the OT roots of the imagery.

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The “ho” (“hey” in the NET!) at the start is usually negative, but here it seems to be positive. Thirsting is a common image for the spiritual journey (for example, Ps 42:1-2; 63:1; 143:6). Buying without money is an oxymoron, underscoring the gift and grace of God.

Verse 2 V. 2d is literally “Enjoy the fatness”. We might translate, “enjoy your meal.” The rich food stands for all the gifts of God given through the covenant. The contrast is with what is not *really* food, food that does not really *satisfy*.

Verse 3 As often, the ear stands for the receptivity of the whole person. Life is the fruit of faithfulness to the covenant (see Deut 30:6, 15, 19–20). The permanence of the covenant is often noticed (Gen 9:16; 17:7; 2 Sam 23:5 etc.). The sure love for David is underlined in 2 Sam 7 and Psalm 89. In Second Isaiah, the role of David is figuratively given to the people (as there was no Davidic monarch at the time). The reference underlines faithful continuity amidst tremendous change—probably as challenging then as now!

Verse 4 This takes up the servant role somewhat. See Is 45:14, 22-24; 49:6.

Verse 5 Holy One of Israel is found earlier: *The sinful nation is as good as dead, the people weighed down by evil deeds. They are offspring who do wrong, children who do wicked things. They have abandoned the Lord, and rejected the Holy One of Israel. They are alienated from him.* (Is 1:4) Israel is to become God’s beacon to other nations—unlikely in the contemporary political setting. See the savage irony of Rom 2:17-24.

Verses 6-7 Vv. 6 and 7 constitute a great call to repentance. These verses echo Deut 4:25–31; 30:1–10; and 1 Kgs 8:46–53. These passage anticipate the Exile and speak of the conditions for restoration.

Verses 8-9 Vv. 8 and 9, justly famous, echo similar themes across the Bible. Cf. *For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him.* (Psa 103:11; also Rom 11:33–36)

Verse 10 The dependence on the seasonal rains makes this metaphor especially powerful and evocative.

Verse 11 The association of the word with the forces of nature recalls the creation by word in Genesis 1. God’s *word* is effective because it is *God’s* word. Cf. Is 45:23; 46:10; 53:10.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The note of gracious, freely given gift is present throughout. Explore your own “human” experience of such free gifts, especially through people who come into your life. Unearned love comes closest and even opens our heart to the gift of God.

2. The contrasting idea is not to waste your time and energy on what does not lead to life. What experiences of life have helped you to realise this yourself? As Augustine put it, our hearts are restless...

3. The “beyond” of God (his transcendence, the *mysterium tremendum*) is part of all authentic religious experience. On your own spiritual journey, what has made this real for you?

4. The last lines talk about “my word”, that is the Word of God, a word which comes to us in silence, in nature, through people and in the Scriptures. In this word, we are called to place our trust. The great Psalm 130 puts it like this: “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope” (Psa 130:5).

PRAYER

Loving God, let your resplendent light illumine our darkness; speak to us and shatter our deafness! May your word penetrate our hearts and change our lives again and again.

We make our prayer through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God for ever and ever. Amen

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 55:1-11; Isaiah 12; 1 John 5:1-9; Mark 1:7-11

READINGS 1 AND 3

Jesus' call to conversion at the start of his ministry is very terse and the first reading explores that invitation to return to God, using a richly expressive range of images and metaphors.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Isaiah 12 makes a very suitable response to the first reading. It takes up, in particular, the themes of water and joy ("With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation").

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First reading

Isaiah 55:1-11

Our Gospel today is Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom and his call to conversion. The first reading explores the experience of conversion using a rich variety of experiences and images. The very last lines about God's word offer us great confidence and hope.

Second reading

1 John 5:1-9

Who was Jesus? Who is Jesus today? These modern-sounding questions lie behind this reading. It was written at a time of failing faith in Jesus, both in his real humanity and his real divinity. The very first line puts it up to us today: if we claim to know who God is, then we must also have faith in Jesus, the Son of God.

Gospel

Mark 1:7-11

Again and again, we Christians need to go back to the core teaching of Jesus, in all its simplicity and richness. Jesus began his ministry with this ringing proclamation about the Kingdom of God and conversion of heart.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

1 and 2 Samuel track the switch from the era of the Judges to the era of the Kings. After the chaotic times of the Judges, the new mediators of God's word are prophets and kings. For the readings this week, 1 Samuel 1-7 present the birth and ministry of Samuel. 1

Samuel 8-15 reflect the ambiguities of this time of upheaval and change.

Monday 8 January

1 Samuel 1:1-8

Today we start, at a distance, the important story of King David, a story to be followed for the next couple of weeks. The Samuel of the title was a religious leader who found and anointed the first kings of Israel. Today's opening verses present us with the challenge of childlessness. The husband's understanding and affection are very touching.

Mark 1:14-20

We start today a fresh reading of the Gospel of Mark: may God give us a listening heart to hear it afresh today!

Tuesday 9 January

1 Samuel 1:9-20

In the Bible, there are "story patterns" that recur. One of these story types regularly tells of a woman who has no children of her own. This is a cause of suffering and supplication. Eventually, by God's intervention, the woman becomes pregnant. Christians are familiar with this kind of story from the Luke's accounts of the birth of John the Baptist and the birth of Jesus. Our passage today includes a critique of the priesthood, because Eli the priest does not discern what is happening.

Mark 1:21-28

Jesus speaks (and acts) always *from within*, from the inside, so to speak, of his own authority.

Wednesday 10 January

1 Samuel 3:1-10, 19-20

This is one of the great stories of call and vocation in the Bible. Once more, the priest Eli is slow to understand. Eventually, however, it dawns on him that God is calling the boy, Samuel. The turning point is in the words "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening," picked up perfectly by the Psalm.

Mark 1:29-39

Our Gospel reminds us of the sources of Jesus' authority and spirituality: his prayer.

Thursday 11 January

1 Samuel 4:1-11

Today the reading introduces a second important element in the story of 1 and 2 Samuel: *the ark of the covenant*. The ark of the covenant was a piece of furniture, a kind of chest or box, used to symbolise God's presence among the people. The presence of the ark gave power to its owners and the loss of it meant a corresponding loss of power. In our story, the loss of the ark and the killing of the sons of Eli are read as a punishment.

Mark 1:40-45

The compassion of Jesus is both immense and immediate. The leper inspires *us* to recognise *our* need of God.

Friday 12 January

1 Samuel 8:4-7, 10-22

This brilliant passage conveys the unease in the Bible with monarchy as such. This may come as a surprise, but listen carefully to all the reasons why a monarch would be a bad idea. But the real objection is the rejection of God as the only true king over Israel. The desire "to be like any other nation" will, in the very long term, lead to disaster and exile.

Mark 2:1-12

This Gospel passage is really about us: we too are carried by others; we too have our sins forgiven; we too learn to walk again in the light of Gospel.

Saturday 13 January

St Hilary of Poitiers, bishop

1 Samuel 9:1-4, 17-19, 10:1

Restoring the missing verses would make the reading clearer and more entertaining.

Finally, we are told of the anointing of the first king over Israel, Saul. The somewhat enigmatic story of the finding of Saul is meant to be a sign that he was God's choice.

Mark 2:13-17

Our story is meant to be provocative on several levels: Jesus goes to the "wrong" people and, even worse, insists he was not sent to the conventionally holy who may not really know their need of God.