

HEARERS OF THE WORD



Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Ps 104 (103); Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

You are my Son, the Beloved

Luke 3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, 16 John answered all of them by saying, “I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 17 His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

Luke 3:18 *So, with many other exhortations, he proclaimed the good news to the people.* 19 *But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done,* 20 *added to them all by shutting up John in prison.*

Luke 3:21 Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, 22 and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The baptism of Jesus by John is found in Mark, Matthew, Luke, the Acts and John. There are, however, differences in the reception and in the interpretation of the tradition. First of all the reception: Mark mentions the baptism without apparent difficulty, although he locates John as Elijah, the one coming *before* the coming one; Matthew is very uncomfortable and inserts a dialogue in which John the Baptist objects to his baptising Jesus; Luke copes (!) by telling us before the baptism that John was in prison (see the verses above in italics, omitted in the lectionary reading); John gives only the phenomena around the baptism and actually leaves the baptism out when you read the text carefully. All of this means that the baptism of Jesus by John is indisputably historical because Christians would not have made up a story which caused them so much un-



Notre Dame de Paris

ease and even embarrassment. Secondly, it means that the baptism was highly significant, both historically and theologically. Historically, the baptism marked the moment when Jesus accepted the role and preaching of the Baptist and at the same time began his own awareness of being the Son in a quite special way.

Theologically, each gospel interpreted the event in the light of the faith concerns at the time of writing. The details for Luke are in the comment below.

The link with the Baptist has more importance than is commonly recognised. It looks as if John the Baptist was a prophet, who had departed to the desert and the Jordan, a move which implied some rejection of the Temple cult. He preached conversion of heart (*metanoia*), illustrated in a once-off immersion rite. His demanding ethics were offered in the light of the coming dreadful intervention / judgement of God. This can be seen in the passage above, which uses the traditional biblical image of harvest

Thought for the day

The great scenes in the Bible, precisely because of their greatness and indeed uniqueness, can be difficult to access personally. For the Baptism of Jesus, there are at least two potential approaches. Firstly, we could go back in our minds to a life-changing turning point in our own lives, so that we can speak of *before* and *after*. Secondly, we could also turn to our own experience when we felt deeply the affirmation of our identity and worth as “the beloved” of someone. In the case of Jesus, these are combined: his identity and life are one, something we would like to be able say about ourselves too.

Prayer

Abba, Father, let us hear again today your words of affirmation to Jesus and in Jesus to us all. As your beloved sons and daughters, draw us more closely into your own life of love. Amen.

to convey the sorting and sifting of the end. What precisely John looked forward to is somewhat unclear: an angel, another prophet, God himself, the messiah? It is historically likely that John proclaimed that the coming one would baptise with wind (*pneuma*) and fire (both images of judgement; cf. Psalm 1). The text was “Christianised” by qualifying wind/spirit with “holy”, yielding Holy Spirit.

It need hardly be said that Christian baptism, that is the participation in the Easter Mystery and the gift of the Holy Spirit, is significantly different to John's baptism, a difference noticed in the New Testament itself:

He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. (Acts 18:25)

Then he said, “Into what then were you baptised?” They answered, “Into John's baptism.” Paul said, “John baptised with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” (Acts 19:3-4)

KIND OF WRITING

Two short anecdotes (*chreiai*), linking the preaching of John and the baptism of Jesus.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The wind

The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. (Ps 1:4) On the wicked he will rain coals of fire and sulphur; A scorching wind shall be the portion of their cup. (Ps 11:6)

The dove

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 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)

NEW TESTAMENT FOREGROUND

Holy Spirit in Luke

Luke 1:15, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-27; 3:16, 22; 4:1, 14, 18; 10:21; 11:13; 12:10, 12.

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. (Luke 4:14)

At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. (Luke 10:21)

Prayer in Luke

In the Third Gospel, significant events are associated explicitly with prayer and in Luke Jesus prays about twice as often as in the other Gospels. As well as in the Baptism scene here, we may note other places where Luke adds that it took place in a context of prayer:

Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" (Luke 9:18)

Now about eight days after these sayings Jesus took with him Peter and John and

James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. (Luke 9:28–29)

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." (Luke 11:1)

In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, "Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial." (Luke 22:44–46)

ST PAUL

And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Gal 4:6–7)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 15 This makes explicit the implied anxiety about the superiority of John who have given baptism to Jesus. For the reader of the Gospel, this question has been already answered in Luke 1-2 by contrasting the roles of John the Baptist and Jesus the Messiah. The distinct stories collide at the Visitation, where the action of the prophet, still in the womb, identifies Jesus as Lord.

Verses 16-17 By describing the coming one, John makes explicit his subordination to the one who is to come. Three points of contrast are drawn: John is not worthy, Jesus will baptise with the Spirit and he will bring judgment. Notice the three elements: water, wind (Spirit) and fire. The imagery of wind / spirit (*pneuma*) will be taken up in Acts 2, the story of Pentecost. Cf. the image of wind from Psalm 1 above.

Verse 18 John's severe preaching of judgment is good news because it leads to conversion of heart and life.

Verses 19-20 This is a very summary version of a longer story told in Mark and Matthew. Luke omits the martyrdom (except for Lk 9:9) but does underline the imprisonment in Luke 7:18-35. By leaving John in prison *before the baptism*, Luke does not deny John baptised Jesus but rather he shifts the spotlight adroitly from John to Jesus himself.

Verse 21 It is noticeable that the baptism as such is consigned to a relative clause while the main sentence here is "the heaven opened". The opening of the heavens points to a new, unprecedented revelation.

Verse 22 Bodily descent is difficult because there is no other way a dove *can* descend! Luke underlines in this way the objective reality of this descent by externalising it. The gospel writer also makes clear the new time of salvation by making Mark's metaphor of the dove into a *literal* evocation of the end of Noah's flood, marking a new time of salvation.

The voice from heaven declares the identity of Jesus as Son in a unique manner. The words combine Psalm 2:7 (common in the New Testament) and Isaiah 42:1 (the first Suffering Servant Song). Cf. Luke 9:35 at the Transfiguration.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The people were searching and John pointed them in the direction of Jesus. On your life's journey who have been the John the Baptist people for you, people who have pointed you in the right direction?
2. The Baptism of Jesus was a very special moment for him that affirmed him in his identity as Son of God and in his mission. Recall the experiences that affirmed you – either in your sense of who you are, or in relation to the direction you were taking in life.
3. The Baptism of Jesus marks a transition point in his life, and the start of his public ministry. Recall the transition points in your own life. Where did you see the grace of God at work in those times?
4. This experience of Jesus occurred when he was at prayer. What part has prayer played in opening you to being aware of God in your life? What part has prayer played in helping you through a transition point in your life?

PRAYER

Open the heavens, almighty Father, and pour out your Spirit upon your people gathered in prayer.

Renew the power of our baptismal cleansing and fill us with zeal for good deeds. Let us hear your voice once again, that we may recognise in your beloved Son our hope of inheriting eternal life. Through Christ our Lord.

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, 12 training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, 13 while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. 14 He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Titus 3:4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. 6 This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour; 7 so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

The reading is appropriate also for the Baptism, following the ancient idea of the three “epiphanies,” one to the Magi, one at the Baptism and another at Cana. The additional paragraph from chapter 3 brings the message of salvation into close proximity with the feast of the Baptism and invites direct reflection our own being baptised.

KIND OF WRITING

The Pastorals present themselves as personal letters from Paul to significant companions. In reality, they are written to communities (in Asia Minor) to bring Pauline doctrine into a new (later) context. They preserve, however, the letter structure, as in the case of Titus:

1:1-4 Salutation
1:5-3:11 *Body of the letter*
3:12-15 Travels, greetings, blessing

The body of the letter

1:5-9 Elders
1:10-16 Warnings
2:1-10 The Christian household
2:11-15 Appearance of Christ
3:1-11 To the whole church

Some of the resounding vocabulary used here marks the text as not from Paul: to appear; saving (= salvation as an adject-

ive; to renounce; worldly; worldly; self-controlled (= lit. wisely); godly; manifestation; great; to redeem; of his own; to look down on (all these expressions are never found in the undisputed letters).

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The writers of the Pastorals were facing a variety of threats at the start of the second century. In response, it is true that there is some domestication of the radical Paul but there is more to it than that. The letters also represent a development of Pauline doctrine in several directions: (i) spirits, angels and the Holy Spirit; (ii) the church as the household of God, with great regard for the inspired Jewish Scriptures. The tension towards the end found in Paul is abandoned—there will still be a second coming, but it is in the very indefinite future. As for date and place, mostly likely the letter to Titus comes from Asia Minor, around the year 100, long after Paul.

RELATED PASSAGES

To Titus, my loyal child in the faith we share: grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Saviour. (Titus 1:4)

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 11 The grace of God is evidently bringing salvation to all; it is not limited to one people (e.g. the Jews) or to an élite (e.g. Gnostics). At the heart of this first appearance of God in Jesus stands the cross and resurrection.

Verse 12 This pile-up of attitudes teaches us that we are to live truly transformed lives in response to this great grace. Taking it earnestly means embarking on a journey of deep change. The Gospel call costs “not less than everything.”

Verse 13 There will be a second appearance. The Gospel is lived in hope between these events. “Great God and Saviour” was found in Ephesus in an inscription dedicated to Caesar. For the author of Titus, the Gospel proclaims a very different great God and saviour, Jesus Christ.

Verse 14 There are allusions here to the genuine Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:15-21. The “for us” indicates that not everyone has responded; it is also an

echo of the Suffering Servant theme. The biblical language of chosen people etc. is applied here to the Christian community.

Verse 4 “Goodness” (*chrēstotēs*) has a rich range of meanings (including uprightness, mildness, kindness); in Greek it sounds a little like “Christ”; it is very much a Pauline expression (Rom 2:4; 3:12; 11:22; 2 Cor 6:6; Gal 5:22; *Eph* 2:7; *Col* 3:12; *Titus* 3:4). The other expression, lit. *philanthrōpía*, is rare and non-Pauline. “God our saviour” is a typical expression of the pastorals (1 Tim 1:1; 2:3; 4:10; Titus 1:3-4; 2:10, 13; 3:4; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1:25). It has deep biblical roots, taking us to the heart of a theology of salvation. God appeared (*epephanē*) in Christ, who thereby offers both salvation and revelation.

Verse 5 Saved on account of God’s mercy is very Pauline. Rebirth is a rare expression being found elsewhere only in Mt 19:28, in a wholly different context. Renewal is also a rare term being found elsewhere only in Rom 12:2. On the other hand, newness in Christ is a strong NT teaching. On baptism: see Rom 6:1-11 and John 3:3-5.

Verse 6 Cf. Rom 5:1-5 on the Spirit.

Verse 7 Again, this verse is very indebted to genuine Pauline language and theology. Notice that salvation refers both to the past as well as to the future.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Being baptised celebrates our conversion, our being changed in Christ. In the coming year, how do I see myself growing in discipleship?

2. We all have parts of our lives in need of purification, that is, in need of the healing, freedom and guidance of the Gospel. It might help to name these concretely for ourselves.

3. Salvation is one of those big words, loaded with history and feeling. Keep the reflection personal by asking how am I being saved (healed and set free) by Jesus at the present moment in my life?

PRAYER

We praise your grace and goodness, your kindness and mercy to all of us in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Help us to live the gifts of rebirth and renewal every day of our lives. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Get you up on a high mount, O Zion, herald of good tidings

- Is. 40:1 Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
- 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the Lord's hand
double for all her sins.
- 3 A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
- 4 Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
- 5 Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."
- 9 Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
- 10 See, the Lord God comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.
- 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.

INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

At the close of the Christmas season, it might seem strange to find Isaiah 40 as our reading. However, in the year of Luke, Isaiah is not read in the Sunday readings of Advent; in any case, it is a fitting reading to match the story of the baptism.

KIND OF WRITING

This is poetry, as usual. The reader will not fail to notice piling up of significant synonyms to get the message across: (i) term, penalty, double; (ii) comfort, speak tenderly; (iii) might, arm, reward, recompense; (iv) feed, gather, carry, gently lead; (v) interspersed are terms full of emotion: get up, lift, say, see. The core message remains "Here is your God!"

ORIGIN OF THE READING

The reading is from Second Isaiah, an anonymous prophet or a series of prophets, whose work is represented in

compassionate tone of Second Isaiah.

Verse 2 The parallel words (term, penalty, double) reflect the reading of the exile as both punishment and purification.

Verse 3 The punctuation here reflects the context of the Exile. Notice the implied acknowledgement that God with them all along in the Exile.

Verse 4 Imagery from what we would call engineering serves to illustrate the saving journey home.

Verse 5 Glory in the Hebrew Bible points to God's presence and action

Verse 9 Originally, these verses sound like the call of the Second Isaiah. "Do not fear" is the ever present reassurance given to the faithful (at least 123 times).

Verse 10 Notice the parallelism of might / arm and reward / recompense. These last two corresponds to the earlier term / penalty / double.

Verse 11 Here is a remarkable and appealing pastoral image, often set to music. The imagery had already a long history before Second Isaiah was written and, of course, it comes up powerfully in the New Testament (Luke 15, John 10 for example). The shepherd is almost motherly to the mother ewes.

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. Very difficult experiences can leave us wondering about God. Where is God? Why this? And yet, with steadfastness, we come to see the hand of God. When has this been true for you?

2. The reading resonates with the term good news. In our culture, we hesitate—and still, the Christian gospel is at its heart astonishingly good Good News. When have I felt this myself?

3. The image of caring invites personal reflection. Who has care for / cares for me? For whom do I care? This is really an experience of being loved. When have I felt God carrying me?

PRAYER

God, all-compassionate and all-loving, we believe that everything from your hand is for our good, even when we cannot see it at the time. Help us to place our trust in you, our good shepherd, as you carry us through life. Through Christ our Lord. Amen

Isaiah 40-55 (some think up to ch. 66). These oracles were spoken, for the most part, just before the end of the great exile in Babylon.

RELATED PASSAGES

The term "good news" calls for special comment. This term (interestingly always a verb in the OT) usually meant ordinary secular good news. But in Isaiah, it points to the good news of God's end-time gift of salvation to his people. John the Baptist and Jesus most likely take the term from Isaiah.

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces (lit. who brings good news) peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Is 52:7; also 60:6 and 61:1).

BRIEF COMMENTARY

Verse 1 The opening words convey the

THE LITURGY

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11; Ps 104 (103) Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7; Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

READINGS 1 AND 3

From quite early Christian tradition, John was identified with the voice crying in the wilderness. Vv. 9-11 are especially appropriate: the herald is called upon to point out the coming one.

THE RESPONSORIAL PSALM

Psalm 104 (103) is a joyful response to the first reading. It is especially suitable because it mentions messengers (first reading) and the holy Spirit (Gospel).

SUNDAY INTRODUCTIONS

First Reading

Isaiah 40:1-5, 9-11

The first generation of Christians went back again and again to the prophet Isaiah. Given today's feast, you can see why. It points not only to the role of John the Baptist but also to the message of Jesus himself.

Second Reading

Titus 2:11-14; 3:4-7

The breadth of vision here, taking in all humanity, offers a deeply encouraging message. It also goes some way to answering a niggling question: why would God *bother*?

Gospel

Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

Jesus' baptism in the Jordan is a solid historical fact. It is reported, however, with symbols, so that we get a window on to what it meant for Jesus himself.

WEEKDAY INTRODUCTIONS

Hebrews is an extraordinary document, written in the best Greek of the New Testament. It is really a sermon rather than a letter. Although the writer is anonymous, analysis tells us we are dealing with a Hellenised Jew, who enjoyed a very good education, particularly in rhetoric and in rabbinic traditions of exegesis. Although Hebrews echoes Pauline tradition, the author cannot really have been St Paul.

What is Hebrews about? It takes up hints from the Gospels and the early

Jesus tradition, and goes on to interpret Jesus' death and resurrection using the Temple priesthood as an interpretative key. This *is* a stretch because Jesus was clearly a layman, not having been born into a priestly family; his death was ritually impure on account of the cross; the location of his death was *outside* the Holy City. So, there is a good deal again the project! At the time, the Temple and its priesthood represented God's presence. Mostly likely Hebrews was written after the destruction of the Temple and the dispersal of the priesthood. For the Christian believer, temple worship is understood, in the Letter, as a foreshadowing of Jesus' presence on earth and in heaven on our behalf.

Monday 13 January

St Hilary, bishop and doctor

Hebrews 1:1-6

The first four verses of this reading are really the introduction to Hebrews. It is a very rich opening, and nearly every word could be reflected upon. The claims made about Jesus, a Galilean prophet executed by the Romans, are breath-taking.

Mark 1:14-20

We start today a fresh reading of the Gospel of Mark: may God gives us a listening heart to hear it afresh today! After the great cycle of feasts, the writer takes us back to the core proclamation of Jesus and the foundational calling of the first disciples.

Tuesday 14 January

Hebrews 2:5-12

Who was / is Jesus? In the words of the Eucharistic Prayer IV, *Made incarnate by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, he shared our human nature in all things but sin.*

Mark 1:21-28

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

Wednesday 15 January

St Ita, virgin

Hebrews 2:14-18

Today, we hear a great teaching from

Hebrews: Jesus is able to help us because *he become one of us*. In this teaching, there is both hope and consolation.

Mark 1:29-39

Our Gospel reminds us of the sources of Jesus authority and spirituality: his own practice of prayer. Out of the prayer comes his willingness to proclaim the good news to everyone.

Thursday 16 January

St Fursa, abbot and missionary

Hebrews 3:7-14

Conversion, as we know, is ongoing. Using Ps 95 as background, the writer reminds us, in the words of St Paul, that *now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation!* (2 Cor 6:2)

Mark 1:40-45

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

Friday 17 January

St Antony of Egypt, abbot

Hebrews 4:1-5, 11

A threatening note enters our reading from Hebrews: those who left Egypt did not enter the promised land. Just to have made a start, even a good start, does not guarantee arrival!!

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 18 January

Hebrews 4:12-16

Two-edged means really very sharp and penetrating. The opening phrase is often quoted - perhaps we can check it against our experience!

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.