

Cycle A THE BAPTISM OF THE LORD

FIRST READING: Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7

Thus says the LORD: Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon whom I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations, not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street. a bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench, until he establishes justice on the earth; the coastlands will wait for his teaching.

I, the LORD, have called you for the victory of justice, I have grasped you by the hand; I formed you, and set you as a covenant of the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness.

SECOND READING: Acts 10:34-38

Peter proceeded to speak to those gathered in the house of Cornelius, saying: "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him. You know the word that he sent to the Israelites as he proclaimed peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all, what has happened all over Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached, how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him."

GOSPEL: Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. John tried to prevent him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and yet you are coming to me?" Jesus said to him in reply, "Allow it now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed him. After Jesus was baptized, he came up from the water and behold, the heavens were opened for him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

I recently heard about the celebrated Protestant preacher and professor, Fred Craddock, who was once invited to preach at Ebenezer Baptist Church...the church of Martin Luther King Senior and Junior here in Atlanta. I wish I had learned his methods of crafting homilies 25 years ago when I was in formation.

Mr. Craddock had moved to the pulpit to read the Gospel when the pastor began to sing. “Then the associates started singing, and the musicians went to their instruments, the piano and the organ and the drums and the electric guitar, and the people started singing. Craddock was standing up there, waiting. Then, he suddenly realized, ‘I’m the one up front, I’m the leader of this,’ so he started clapping his hands and singing. Then everybody stood up and started clapping their hands and swinging and singing, and it was just marvelous. Then at a certain point the pastor put his hand out...it got quiet, everyone sat down and Craddock started preaching. He acted like ‘he could’ve preached all day.’ Afterwards he said to the pastor, ‘Well, that kind of shocked me a little bit. You didn’t tell me you were going to do that.’ He said, ‘Well, I didn’t plan it.’ ‘Then why did you do it?’ And the pastor said, ‘Well, when you stood up there, one of my associates leaned over to me and said, *That boy’s going to need some help*’.”

Reflecting on today’s Gospel about the Baptism of the Lord, Mr. Craddock repeated, “*That boy’s going to need some help.*” He continued, “I can just see God The Father and The Holy Spirit peering down from heaven on John the Baptist down by the Jordan. Here comes Jesus, determined to get started on his mission and full of vim, vigor and bright ideas. And The Spirit turns to The Father and says, “*That boy’s going to need some help.*” And The Father thinks about it a few moments, looks out over the horizon and into the future and sees the trials and tribulations, the sadness and sorrow, the great praise mixed with hopeless failure and frequent rejection. And The Father nods sadly and says to The Spirit, “*I believe you’re right. That boy is going to some help.*” And then a slow smile spread across the Father’s face and He said, “*And guess what Spirit; you’re it!*”

I like that story for a variety of reasons. It reminds us that we can always rely on our musicians for a little help. It also reminds us that baptism – both Jesus’ and our own –is about action, not

holiness; about doing something, not just being somebody; and that we can always use a little help when living the Gospel... especially when doing justice work.

A while ago I visited that same Ebenezer Baptist church in Atlanta where Mr. Craddox preached at and I stood outside at the tomb of Martin Luther and Coretta King. The tomb is on an island in the middle of a gentle waterfall. And that waterfall is engraved with the inspired text that Dr. King spoke on August 28, 1963 in his "I have a Dream" speech at the now-famous March on Washington. He paraphrased Amos 5:24 when he said, We will not be satisfied *"until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream."*

"Jesus's baptism launched him into the deep waters of humanity, into a mission to erase our inhumane lack of attentiveness to each other, to raise up the dignity of all, to let justice and righteousness role like a mighty stream. But as in His day, today there are many currents of prejudice, rising tides of hatred, and torrents of hostility threatening to submerge the dignity of people around the world and in our backyard."

And so we take up our baptismal challenge assured that we "who need a little help," might be strengthened by God's mighty Holy Spirit who flooded our souls at our baptism... To do the justice work Isaiah proclaims in the first reading...to be *"a light for the nations, to open the eyes of the blind, to bring out prisoners from confinement, and from the dungeon, those who live in darkness."* And, for us to continue the Jesus work of *"doing good and healing all those oppressed"* that Peter urges in the second reading.

[musicians begin softly playing "We Shall Overcome"]

You may know that I am Irish by marriage...my wife Pat says she is 87.5% Irish. There is an ancient Irish legend that when the Old Irish immersed a baby at baptism, they left the right arm out of the font so that it would remain pagan for combat.

On this feast day ending the Christmas season, I trust we will re-immense our right hand in Holy Water on the way out of church, so that we will be blessed to be prepared for holy combat: to find the lost, heal the broken, feed the hungry, release the prisoners, support all nations, bring peace among all... and, that *"we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like water and righteousness like a mighty stream."* And the Church says Amen!