

**Second Sunday in Ordinary Time – A  
January 20, 2008**

**Our green vestments and the lack of decorations tell us we have moved on from the Christmas season and have entered the winter ordinary time. Our green vestments suggest that this is a season of growing in our faith, and of living our faith more fully.**

**God's word to us this morning presents Jesus as God's son and God's servant—one who lived and died doing always the will of his heavenly Father.**

**As the church of God in this part of Denver, a community that is blessed with many African-American people, we also honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He too lived as a servant of God, and his self-sacrifice has made America more just and peaceful.**

**Homily.**

**If our scripture readings sound somewhat familiar this morning, it may be because they are very similar to the readings we had last Sunday when we celebrated the Baptism of the Lord.**

**Last Sunday we heard the first of the servant songs from the Prophet Isaiah, and today we hear the second of those songs. Last week we read Matthew's account of the baptism of the Lord, and today we move from Matthew's gospel to hear John's account of the Lord's baptism. This is the church's way of telling us that the Lord's baptism and ours, are so important that it is good to reflect on these mysteries more than once.**

**Today's readings draw our attention to the true nature of Jesus: first, Jesus accepted and lived his role as the servant of God; and second, he is true Son of God who unites with himself all people of faith and good will into one universal church, the body of Christ.**

**Jesus as servant is presented in the first reading from the Book of Isaiah, in Psalm 40, and in the gospel. Let us look first at the gospel. What we just heard is the account of Jesus' baptism in John's gospel. Notice that John does not present the baptism directly as Matthew and Luke do in their gospels.**

**The reason for this is that the early church really struggled to understand why Jesus was baptized at all, and why he was baptized by his cousin John. Baptism was for the Jews a ritual of purification from sin and defilement. Jewish law prescribed many occasions that necessitated a ritual bath before one could approach God. John's baptism was clearly an expression of repentance for sin. So why did Jesus, who was free from sin, ask John to baptize him?**

**The clearest answer to that question is this: though Jesus had no personal sin that needed to be washed away, and though Jesus was also free from the effects of Adam's sin, he wanted us to see him, not just as an individual, but as part of humanity, one who would identify with us in every way. He would take on himself our sinfulness and its effects, would take on himself the sin of the world. When he died, our sins would die with him, and we and all humanity would be free from sin and the effects of sin.**

**This is one of the reasons why John the Baptist can point to Jesus and say: Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**

**Lamb of God refers both to the Passover lamb whose flesh and blood saved God's people from slavery in Egypt; and here, in this context to the servant of God mentioned in the four songs of the servant in Isaiah. In Aramaic, the language spoken by John and Jesus, the word *talya* means both lamb and servant.**

**Understanding these songs of the servant can really deepen our understanding of our Lord Jesus, and so I hope you will be patient with me if I take a few minutes to look more closely at the figure of the servant of God.**

**Last Sunday we heard the first of the songs of the servant as our first reading. There we heard God the Father call his servant his chosen one in whom he was well pleased. At Jesus' baptism, the voice from heaven applies those very words to Jesus, identifying him as the promised servant.**

**A short time later, when Jesus stands up in the synagogue in Nazareth, he reads this first servant song from Isaiah and says: today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. Jesus clearly saw himself not only as promised Messiah, but also as servant of God.**

**Today we hear the second of the songs of the servant. This song repeats that the servant is to be a light to the nations; but it goes on to say:**

**...it is too little for you, my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob; I will make you a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.**

**God's servant will bring salvation, not just to Israel, but to all peoples.**

**In the third and fourth songs of the servant we hear many references to the Lord's passion and death: he was bruised for**

**our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole. Like a lamb led to the slaughter, he opened not his mouth.**

**The scrolls found near Qumran contained many copies of the Book of Isaiah. It is the book Jesus quotes very often. Isaiah was well known at the time of Jesus and by Jesus himself. And he knew what it meant to be the servant of God.**

**In Matthew and Luke's gospels, the voice from heaven quotes clearly from Psalm 2—You are my son. In the context of this psalm, this a clear reference to the son or descendant of King David who would establish the everlasting kingdom—a clear reference to the Messiah. And the voice then quotes the first of the servant songs. Jesus would hear this voice as affirming his mission. He was to be both messiah and servant.**

**Never before, in all the commentaries on the Old Testament, had anyone associated the servant and the messiah. Now, for the first time, they are associated with one person, Jesus of Nazareth.**

**Jesus was the messiah who would lead a kingdom totally unlike any ever known on the face of the earth. He would found and lead this kingdom by living the beatitudes, by being the servant of God, by accepting suffering and death on a cross to demonstrate the greatness of God's love for us, and the power of God to bring eternal life and glory out of humiliation and death.**

**In his gospel account of the baptism, John the evangelist goes further and presents the testimony of John the Baptist that God had revealed to him that Jesus is not only the Lamb of God, he is also the Son of God. He presents a much more profound truth than the one we find expressed in Matthew and**

**Luke's accounts of the baptism. For John the evangelist, the voice from heaven and the dove descending on Jesus are clear signs that point to the true identity of Jesus.**

**Jesus had to be baptized by John because John was a true and believable witness to the true nature of Jesus.**

**There is so much more in today's scriptures, but this is enough for today. It is important for us to understand who Jesus is, for he is the Lord we follow. As his disciples, we too, must be willing to live and die as servants of God. For 2000 years, Christians have borne witness to our faith in Jesus, even to the shedding of blood. *Martyr* means witness.**

**Let us believe, and let us witness to our beliefs.**