

January 16, 2011  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

I mentioned last week that as the Church presses into the liturgical year, that we would learn by example the ministry of a servant. As you may recall, the Scripture readings last week focused on the baptism of Jesus; however, we in turn were encouraged to review the meaning of our own baptism. Here we discovered that His baptism was one of identification with our sin. By entering the baptismal waters on our behalf, Jesus took upon Himself our sin, so that when we experience the baptismal waters, we in reality leave our sin there with Him.

We also learned that the efficacy of Baptism is demonstrated not by our will or decision, but in the obedience of God's only begotten Son. As a result of His initiation, an action orchestrated by God and empowered by the Spirit, we are invited to participate with Him in His death, burial and resurrection, and thus become the children of God. "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (Jn. 1:12-13).

We also learned that when we are born-again of the water and of the Spirit, as suggested to Nicodemus by Jesus, we are commissioned to live-again. To be born-again suggests a new start in life, only this time, we are to live for Christ and not live in bondage to the old sin nature now left behind in the baptismal waters.

Unfortunately, the concept of being born-again is sometimes minimalized to a quantitative status, i.e., “I am born-again, I’m freed from the penalties of sin, and so I have eternal life, . . . and for many such is the closure of the issue. The confession of many often ends with an - I have or I am - I have eternal life or I am born-again.

However, when we read the Scripture in the context of its historical setting, and when we observe the life of Jesus as a model for discipleship, we soon come to realize that there is much more to a new life in Christ. Life cannot remain the same once we have received an outpouring of the Holy Spirit; indeed the Spirit by His very indwelling presence draws and motivates us to want to be more like the One who so wondrously redeemed us.

For Jesus and for us too, baptism became a pivotal point, a type of initiation ceremony, that results in a lifestyle change from the ordinary life of the prevailing culture to a public display or modeling of joyful servant-hood and humble suffering.

This morning’s Scripture reading from the Gospel According to St John resumes the story where we stopped last week; but this time we are privileged with additional information from a different writer.

The beloved Apostle John makes no effort to describe the actual baptism of Jesus. Rather, St. John, whose total purpose in writing is to present Jesus as the only true revelation of God, chooses to begin by describing John the Baptist as the one crying in the wilderness: “Make straight the way of the Lord.” John clearly

understood that hearts must be readied in order to return to the King of Kings. Years later the Apostle Peter would again, echoing the vociferous Baptizer, usher in a new age with, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

Biblical scholar C. K. Barrett in his monumental volume, *The Gospel According to St. John* writes, "The story of Jesus requires that, just as God must be understood in terms of Jesus, so the humanity of Jesus, and with that the humanity of the race, must be seen and understood in terms of God. For God and for man the future lies only in the unity of the two, a unity to which the figure of Jesus points" (p.99).

Initially, it appears that John the Baptist was unable to identify who was the Christ. Dialogue with the religious rulers concerning his ministry seemed to focus on the fact that he was not the Anointed One. In essence, his message was intended to direct the hearts of the people to repent, seek forgiveness, and turn from their sin, "I baptize with water; but there is one among you whom you do not recognize, the one who is coming after me, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to untie" (Jn. 1:26-27).

St. John begins his discussion on the next day. Whether it was the very next day after the baptism or later no one can be absolutely sure, but this we do know, John the Baptizer had experienced a direct revelation from the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove and now he was more than convinced as to the identity of Jesus

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He is the one of whom I said, 'A man is coming after me who ranks ahead of me because he existed before me.' I did not know him, but the reason why I came baptizing with water was that he might be made known to Israel" (Jn. 1:30).

Certainly, John the Baptist had experienced a major paradigm shift if you will. Try to put yourself in his place. The words of Isaiah's 49<sup>th</sup> chapter must have pulsed in his mind. Though scholars differ as to whom the servant is in this OT passage, I find it quite reasonable to suggest that he may be none other than John the Baptist. Isaiah writes,

The Lord said to me: "You are my servant, Israel, through whom I show my glory. Though I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly, spent my strength, Yet my reward is with the LORD, my recompense is with my God. For now the LORD has spoken who formed me as his servant from the womb, that Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him; and I am made glorious [famous] in the sight of the LORD, and my God is now my strength" (Is. 49:3-5)!

If the Baptist were to be identified as the servant in this passage, then it would also be reasonable to conclude that the "him" in this passage is referring to the Lord Jesus, "that Jacob may be brought back to him and Israel gathered to him." Therefore indeed, John the Baptist is reaffirming his belief, and affirming to us today that Jesus is truly the Messiah. So sure is he that he literally releases

his disciples to follow Jesus with the statement, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

But what are we to think concerning this new information? Can we trust the testimony of John the Baptist? Is the testimony of one person enough to convince us of this truth? Does not Scripture state, "Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Duet. 19:15, 2 Cor. 13:1)?

Here we observe that there were two disciples with the Baptist the third time he encountered Jesus. Once again he said, Behold the Lamb of God. One of the disciples in the passage is identified as Andrew, the brother of Peter and the other is traditionally believed to be John the writer of the Gospel bearing his name.

So once again we turn our attention to the mysterious words, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Barrett comments that the title Lamb of God is definitely taken from the Old Testament, but where it is uncertain. Quite possibly garnered from the Passover Lamb event in the Exodus 12 story, or the lamb mentioned in Isaiah 53:7, "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth." However neither of these accounts seems to fit because in both circumstances neither mention of the lamb was associated with the expiation or removal of sin.

Barrett concludes that St. John's usage of terms and words suggests a source other than OT Judaism. St. John now advanced in age and applied wisdom is now capable of a much deeper

understanding of Jesus. Hence, the Greek words he chooses and the context in which they are used clearly suggest that Jesus is the Paschal Lamb of God in the context of the Last Supper and the Eucharist.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Where have we heard this expression before? It sounds all too familiar. Yes indeed, in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, just before Holy Communion. This phrase is used in all of the oldest Early Church liturgical manuscripts known to man. Here the priest raises the fractured body and blood of Christ and proclaims, "This is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Happy are those who are called to his supper." And the people respond, "Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and I shall be healed.

Barrett continues, "The Eucharist is a Paschal meal and in it the death of Christ for the remission of sins is portrayed. In the present context, the two propositions (a) Christ was the Passover Lamb, (b) Christ bore, or took away, sins, though originally unconnected, are combined" (p.176). Every time the Eucharist is celebrated Jesus renews His redemption covenant with us and we with Him.

To think that John the Baptist's announcement concerning the Lamb of God actually pre-figured the Eucharist is certainly thought provoking to say the least. For him, the revelation of Jesus as both Messiah and sacrifice must have been overwhelming, and so too it is for us.

To fully understand the relationship between the Last Supper, the Eucharist and the forgiveness of sin one must first consider the nature of covenant and the nature of the covenant relationships in terms of covenant requirements. Certainly, this is no little topic and today time restraints prohibit any in depth study.

However, all covenants have conditions for the renewal of the stated covenantal agreements. Both parties must maintain the covenant in order for it to be enforced. Both parties of necessity must understand the terms of the covenant and the reason for its existence. Therefore, may I suggest the following?

- 1) If we are willing to consider that St. John interpreted John the Baptist's statement, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world in the context of the Eucharist.
- 2) We understand that the new covenant written in His blood was instituted during the Last Supper and initiated upon His death on the cross and guaranteed in His resurrection and ascension into heaven, and
- 3) St. Paul brings additional clarity by stating that every time we share in the Eucharist we proclaim His death until He comes. And in addition, we understand that St. Paul's Eucharistic descriptions are written in covenantal marital terms and in the form of sacred law; then, we can rejoice along with John the Baptist that it is possible that we too can behold the Lamb of God in a sacramental encounter.

In other words, every time we are gathered together by the Father to worship (He initiated the covenant and therefore He is the one who sets the terms and times and places), we are blessed by the Lord's presence in the form of bread and wine – the flesh and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sin. Like John, we are filled with the Holy Spirit, and empowered by the Triune God to love and serve the Lord. Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke or penetrated it, and gave it as His food to a hungry lost and dying world.

Earlier I shared a quote from Barrett, "The story of Jesus requires that, just as God must be understood in terms of Jesus, so the humanity of Jesus, and with that the humanity of the race, must be seen and understood in terms of God. For God and for man the future lies only in the unity of the two, a unity to which the figure of Jesus points." This was the vision John the Baptist saw fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ. He saw Jesus as the Paschal Lamb of God who would take away our sin. St. John understood Jesus as the sacramental Eucharistic Lamb that renews the new covenant written in His Blood for our forgiveness, redemption and eternal life.

Let us continue to ask the Lord God to deepen our experience and our understanding of Baptism and the Eucharist. And may we continue to examine our hearts, be quick to repent, and walk in unity as we celebrate in these sacred mysteries? These indeed are conditions we are required to keep in His redemption covenant. We ask these things, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.