

SUNDAY READINGS

READ AT HOME

The Baptism of the Lord

Year C

9 January 2022



Collect

O God, whose Only Begotten Son
has appeared in our very flesh,
grant, we pray, that we may be inwardly transformed
through him whom we recognise as outwardly like ourselves.
Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.

Amen.

Readings and Commentaries

The Baptism of the Lord suffers in comparison with its companion event, the Transfiguration. We hear the story of the Transfiguration both on the second Sunday of Lent every year and also on the feast-day itself, August 6. By contrast, there is no repeat celebration of the Baptism, and today's observance is even relegated to a Monday every so often.

None of the gospel writers tells us how the baptism itself took place. Only Mark states plainly that Jesus was baptised, but he joins Matthew and Luke in telling us more about what happened afterwards. John does the same but more indirectly via the testimony of the Baptist. In sum, all four are intent on describing the "epiphany" that occurred. All of them report the descent of the Spirit "like a dove." Apart from John, they also testify to the voice that spoke from heaven, just as they do in their account of the "epiphany" that is the transfiguration.

The three synoptics present Jesus' baptism as the catalyst for his public ministry. The Spirit he has received drives him into the desert from which he emerges to announce the reign of God. The Preface for today makes this connection. We praise and thank God because "Christ your Servant has been anointed with the oil of gladness and sent to bring the good news to the poor." That's our own baptismal dignity and mission.

A reading from the prophet Isaiah 40:1–5, 9–11

‘Console my people, console them’ says your God.
‘Speak to the heart of Jerusalem
and call to her that her time of service is ended,
that her sin is atoned for, that she has received
from the hand
of the Lord double punishment for all her crimes.’

A voice cries, ‘Prepare in the wilderness
a way for the Lord.

Make a straight highway for our God
across the desert.

Let every valley be filled in,
every mountain and hill be laid low,
let every cliff become a plain,
and the ridges a valley;
then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed
and all mankind shall see it; for the mouth of the
Lord has spoken.’

Go up on a high mountain,
joyful messenger to Zion.

Shout with a loud voice,
joyful messenger to Jerusalem.

Shout without fear, say to the towns of Judah,
‘Here is your God.’

Here is the Lord coming with power,
his arm subduing all things to him.
The prize of his victory is with him,
his trophies all go before him.
He is like a shepherd feeding his flock,
gathering lambs in his arms,
holding them against his breast
and leading to their rest the mother ewes.

Responsorial Psalm Ps 103:1–2, 3–4, 24–25, 27–30

R. Oh, bless the Lord, my soul!

Lord God, how great you are,
clothed in majesty and glory,
wrapped in light as in a robe!
You stretch out the heavens like a tent. **R.**

Above the rains you build your dwelling.
You make the clouds your chariot,
you walk on the wings of the wind,
you make the winds your messengers
and flashing fire your servants. **R.**

How many are your works, O Lord!
In wisdom you have made them all.
The earth is full of your riches.
There is the sea, vast and wide,
with its moving swarms past counting,
living things great and small. **R.**

All of these look to you
to give them their food in due season.
You give it, they gather it up:
you open your hand, they have their fill. **R.**

You take back your spirit, they die,
returning to the dust from which they came.
You send forth your spirit, they are created;
and you renew the face of the earth. **R.**

First Reading

When John the Baptist bursts on the scene in the gospel story, all four evangelists present him as the “voice crying in the wilderness” prophesied by Isaiah. They are quoting from verses that follow the command we hear today, “Console my people, console them’ says your God” (40:1). These words of comfort generate the title of the Book of Consolation (chapters 40-55).

Today we hear a substantial portion of the first chapter. It’s addressed to the exiles who suffered the loss of all they put their faith in – the land, the temple, the king. Now they are overwhelmed by the challenge of making a fresh start in their devastated city. Commissioned to encourage them, Isaiah does so in a series of four oracles.

The first conveys God’s assurance that what the people have suffered as a result of their sinful infidelity has come to an end. The remaining three depict in vivid imagery the advent of their glorious saviour. Every obstacle on his way will be removed. Heralds will shout the news of his coming. And this all-conquering victor will protect and nurture his people like a shepherd his sheep.

Today’s test serves as the grand prologue to the Book of Consolation. It combines the seriousness of a formal proclamation with the profound joy of celebration. It calls on readers to deliver it with a heightened sense of occasion and at a measured pace. Their tone of voice will need to communicate the comfort of the first and last sections and the majesty of the two central stanzas.

Responsorial Psalm

Awareness of the organic link between the great festivals of Christmas and Easter has grown over the years. The psalm for today offers a subtle hint of this connection. Psalm 103/104 is a joyful hymn of praise honouring the God of all creation. Prayed on this final feast of the Christmas season, it calls to mind the first reading at the Easter Vigil, the majestic description of the six days of creation in the book of Genesis. Like this story, the psalm is a poetic evocation of the marvels of creation, not an empirical account.

Reference to the spirit in the final verse of the responsorial psalm forges a link with both Genesis and the gospel. The spirit sent to create life and renew the earth recalls the spirit of God hovering over the waters at the dawn of creation (Gen 1:2). In turn the descent of the spirit on Jesus as he is baptised heralds the birth of a new creation.

The verses are selected from various parts of the psalm while the response simply repeats the exclamation with which the psalm begins and ends. The psalm as a whole invites us to forsake our rationalist mindset and allow ourselves to wonder at the glories of creation and thereby their Creator. It is this sense of wonder that readers will evoke if they proclaim the psalm with the poetic flair it deserves. They will need to attend to the overall length of the psalm (unusually long at five verses) and the varied length of the verses themselves.

**A reading from the letter of
St Paul to Titus**

2:11–14; 3:4–7

God's grace has been revealed, and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race and taught us that what we have to do is to give up everything that does not lead to God, and all our worldly ambitions; we must be self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world, while we are waiting in hope for the blessing which will come with the Appearing of the glory of our great God and saviour Christ Jesus. He sacrificed himself for us in order to set us free from all wickedness and to purify a people so that it could be his very own and would have no ambition except to do good.

When the kindness and love of God our saviour for mankind were revealed, it was not because he was concerned with any righteous actions we might have done ourselves; it was for no reason except his own compassion that he saved us, by means of the cleansing water of rebirth and by renewing us with the Holy Spirit which he has so generously poured over us through Jesus Christ our saviour. He did this so that we should be justified by his grace, to become heirs looking forward to inheriting eternal life.

**A reading from the holy Gospel
according to Luke**

3:15–16, 21–22

A feeling of expectancy had grown among the people, who were beginning to think John might be the Christ, so John declared before them all, 'I baptise you with water, but someone is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

Now when all the people had been baptised and while Jesus after his own baptism was at prayer, heaven opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily shape, like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "you are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you."

Second Reading

Apart from the Midnight and Dawn Masses for Christmas, we only hear from Paul's letter to Titus on this day in Year C. In fact today's text is not a new passage. The Lectionary simply makes a single reading out of the two allocated to Christmas Day. What follows is summarised from the previous commentaries.

There's no agreement among scholars whether Paul himself wrote the letter to Titus or whether it's the work of a later author writing in Paul's name. It's sufficiently Pauline in vocabulary, style and content to be considered authentic. Its recipient, Titus, became a Christian believer from a non-Jewish Greek background. An early co-worker, he is addressed in this letter as leader of the Church in Crete.

The reading, in marked contrast to the jubilant spirit of Isaiah and the psalm, is quite sober in tone. After the opening references to the revelation of God's grace and to salvation for the whole human race, the focus turns to the demands of Christian living while Christ's return in glory is awaited. What puts these demands in perspective is the good news of the two events establishing the time-frame for holy living – Jesus' appearing in the flesh and his ultimate appearing in glory.

The remainder of the reading offers a summary of Paul's core teaching on justification by faith, with additional reference to baptism by water and Spirit. The verse that follows the selected passage reads: "This is doctrine you can rely on."

Also Pauline in character are the long sentences that elaborate on the fundamental principles he is stating. In itself the logic is not complex, but readers will need to prepare well. The assembly should be able to hear clearly the key points being made in the main clauses and not get lost when these are developed in the subordinate clauses.

Gospel

For all the brevity of the gospel accounts of Jesus' baptism, they have a wealth of associations in both New and Old Testaments. Those familiar with the Old Testament will be reminded of the spirit's role in creation, of the dove that signalled the end of Noah's flood, of the spirit-guided judges of Israel, of God's chosen servant in the songs of Isaiah, and of the kings anointed to rule on God's behalf.

New Testament readers will recall the heavenly voice that spoke on the mount of transfiguration and of Jesus' intense prayer there and in the Garden of Olives. The descent of the Spirit on Jesus will prompt reflection on the epochal event of Pentecost and subsequent bestowals of the Spirit in the early life of the Church. One characteristic feature of Luke's account is his focus on the prayer of Jesus. Jesus' practice of prayer and his teaching on prayer form a luminous thread through the fabric of Luke's gospel.

Fittingly, this gospel concludes the Christmas season on the same wonderful note as the gospel for Christmas Day. The last verse of John's prologue reads: "No one has ever seen God; it is the only Son, who is nearest the Father's heart, who has made him known" (1:18). It is into this intimate divine relationship that we ourselves have been baptised.

Concluding Prayer

Almighty, ever-living God,
when Christ was baptised in the river Jordan
the Holy Spirit came upon him
and your voice proclaimed from heaven, 'This is my beloved Son.'
Grant that we,
who by water and the Holy Spirit are your adopted children,
may continue steadfast in your love.
Through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

(Concluding Prayer: Morning and Evening Prayer from Liturgy of the Hours for the Baptism of the Lord)