

Comments**Baptism of the Lord****Year A**

First Sunday after the Epiphany Ordinary/Lectionary 1

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.
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Isaiah 42:1-9

NRSV

In 41:1, God speaks to Israelites scattered around the Mediterranean ("coastlands", also in 42:4) in courtroom language, calling them together "for judgement". God has "roused a victor from the east" (41:2, Cyrus) to serve him by conquering nations. God has acted in the past ("first", 41:4) and will prophesy a coming revelation of himself ("last"). Other nations, and the gods they choose, are powerless, for they seek "courage" in what humans make (41:5-7). God demands: "set forth your case" (41:21): prove that you can foretell the future based on the past ("former things", 41:22)! They cannot (41:28), but God can.

42:1-4 is one of four Servant Songs, poems about God's special agent who will fulfill his purpose for the faithful community; though innocent, he will suffer for his people. People of other nations choose their gods, but God will select his "servant", his "chosen"; he has anointed this person (or Israel) with his "spirit". When the agent comes, he will be unobtrusive and quiet (42:2, unlike Cyrus), gentle, respectful of others, and patient (v. 3). He will "bring forth justice", i.e. take legal decisions ratifying and executing God's will. He will not fail ("faint", 42:4) nor be discouraged ("crushed") until he has achieved God's purposes; he will win over people to God's ways ("teaching"). He will continue to do what God did in the past (42:5): he, the creator, is the source of life for his people (as he was in Adam); he will give his "spirit" to those who follow him. God called Israel as his people, led and "kept" (42:6, Revised English Bible: "formed", as he *formed* Adam) them, and swore a pact with them. They are to bring enlightenment to others ("as ... a light to the nations", 42:6), to set them free. 42:8-9 returns to the courtroom: God's name is *Yahweh* ("the LORD"); he alone is God. Having seen his integrity in his acts in the past, his people can be sure that the "new things" he announces will indeed happen. He will bring his integrity to all (42:1).

Psalm 29

NRSV

This psalm is probably based on one to the Canaanite god Baal, the storm god, who brings the annual thunder-storm, the source of fertility for the land. In Israelite hands it expresses God's supremacy and universal rule. In vv. 1-2, all other gods are invited to acknowledge the Lord's supremacy and the glory due to him. (Israel was not yet strictly monotheistic.) Vv. 3-9 give us a picture of the storm. The "voice of the Lord" (vv. 3, 4, 5, 7-9) is thunder (repetitious claps). The storm is first seen approaching over the Mediterranean (v. 3); it sweeps in to the land, breaking the tall "cedars" (v. 5), as it advances across southern Lebanon. It vents its power on Mount "Lebanon" (v. 6) and then on Mount "Sirion"; it proceeds on into "the wilderness" (v. 8, the Arabian Desert). ("Flames of fire", v. 7, is lightning.) "Kadesh" (v. 8) is probably *Kedar*, part of the desert. The Word of God is

indeed mighty. In v. 9, "all" the gods do acknowledge God's supremacy; they cry *Glory be to the Lord!* God rules over all from his throne (v. 10). May the Lord strengthen Israel and give it peace.

Acts 10:34-43

NRSV

Peter is visiting Cornelius, an officer of the occupying Roman army and already a believer in God. Peter breaks Jewish law by visiting a Gentile. The Greek here is rough, full of grammatical errors, unlike the rest of Acts, so we may well have Peter's unedited words. He tells the assembled company that God does not favour Jews over others: anyone, whatever his nationality, who reveres God and lives in unison with him "is acceptable to him" (v. 35). In vv. 36-38, Peter summarizes Jesus' earthly ministry; he applies prophecies found in Isaiah 52:7 and 61:1 to Christ. (Psalm 107:20 says "... he sent out his word ...") Christ is *Kyrios*, "Lord of all" (v. 36). In baptism, the Father "anointed" (v. 38) Jesus "with the Holy Spirit" and with the "power" of God (but he was already integral with God's very being.) The good news ("message", v. 37) spread throughout Palestine ("Judea"); he "went about" (v. 38) "doing good" and combatting evil, doing deeds so powerful that it is clear that he was God's agent: he is a model for all to follow.

He suffered death as one guilty of a capital offence, per Deuteronomy 21:23: he hung on a "tree" (v. 39) and was cursed. (By Jesus' time, the "tree", a pole, had acquired a cross-arm.) But, although cursed, the Father "raised him" (v. 40) and "allowed him to appear" to those chosen by God – to be "witnesses" (v. 41). In Luke 24:41-43, Jesus eats broiled fish with them, so he was clearly humanly alive again, i.e. physically brought back from death, resurrected. Jesus, the *Kyrios*, is the one appointed by God to set up the Kingdom and to judge both those who are alive, and those who have died, at Judgement Day (v. 42). Then v. 43: he fulfills many Old Testament prophecies: he is the one through whom sins are forgiven. Forgiveness is now available to "everyone who believes", not just to Jews.

Matthew 3:13-17

NRSV

John the Baptist has appeared, calling people to repentance, to turning back to God's ways, to the way of life to which Israel committed herself at Sinai. He tells of the nearness of God's kingdom, the time of complete fulfilment of God's promises to humans. A new era, in which God rules, is almost here! John seeks to dissuade Jesus from seeking baptism but (in words that we do not fully understand) Jesus insists: for the present, being baptised by you is to perfectly fulfill the Father's will. In being baptised, Jesus joins the community now walking in God's ways. His baptism shows his continuity with God's will seen in the Old Testament: (1) the coming of the "Spirit of God" (v. 16), an Old Testament term, shows he is the Messiah; (2) the words spoken by the heavenly "voice" (v. 17) are much like Isaiah 42:1: Jesus is the agent of God who will suffer for others – not the kind of Messiah people expected. "Beloved" is not sentiment; rather it indicates God's will. The "voice" (v. 17) says three things: (1) Jesus really is God's "Son"; (2) he is chosen for ministry to God's people, and (3) God approves his coming for baptism and his joining with his people in preparing for the coming crisis.