

JANUARY 9, 2011: THE BAPTISM OF JESUS
Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Acts 10:34-38 Matthew 3:13-17

Who among us, baptized as infants, has not longed for an adult sacrament in which we can proclaim our commitment to Jesus? Especially on days like today, when we celebrate Jesus' baptism, we'd like to respond in a formal, mature way to the call he extends to each of his followers.

Yet those who understand the biblical account of the Lord's Supper know there's no need to create a sacrament. We already have an outward sign, instituted by Christ, in which we can say, "Yes!" or "No!" to a call to become another Christ. We do exactly that when we step forward to receive from the Eucharistic cup.

John Meier singles out Jesus' words over the cup in the earliest account of the Last Supper we possess: I Corinthians 11. "This is the cup of the covenant in my blood." Fr. Meier contends that Jesus, knowing his death is imminent, is worried that the vision which drove his public ministry would come to an end at 3:00 o'clock the next afternoon. During his last meal with his closest friends, Jesus looks for some assurance they'll carry on the work that was bringing about his death. The outward sign they were willing to do so was their drinking from his cup; the cup that symbolized the unique covenant he had made with Yahweh at his baptism, the agreement he would soon seal with his blood.

Presuming Meier is correct, every time we stand up and receive from the Eucharistic cup we're experiencing the equivalent of an "adult baptism." We're publicly stating our commitment to carry on the work of Jesus.

As a good Jew, Jesus had entered into the covenant every Jew makes with Yahweh, both the "pre-law" contract in Genesis 16 and the Sinai agreement in Exodus. Yet, from the gospels, it's clear that he also entered into his own personal relationship with Yahweh.

More than five hundred years before Jesus' last meal, Deutero-Isaiah insisted that every commitment, every covenant with God is unique, he's certain, for instance, that Yahweh called him to prophetic ministry, but he's also certain he's different from his prophetic predecessors. He's extremely low-key: "not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard in the street." He's never to crush people with his divine proclamations: "A bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench." And his ministry is to reach far beyond the exiled Israelites to whom he's originally sent: "He shall bring forth justice to the nations (Gentiles). . . the coastlands (Gentiles) will wait for his teaching."

Luke, the author of Acts, knows that those carrying on the ministry of Jesus will, like Deutero-Isaiah, have to start pushing the boundaries of their "security zone." Just as the prophet believed his words would eventually reach beyond Judaism, Peter, realizes the eventual is now. That's why, in today's passage, he states a major theme of Luke's two volume work: "In truth, I see that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him." On Easter Sunday night we presume none of the disciples who drank from Jesus' cup three nights earlier realized this specific implication of his or her action.

If Jesus' baptism weren't significant, the first three evangelists would have omitted it from their narratives - as John did. At the time the gospels were composed, the Baptist's followers were still active, claiming John, not Jesus, was the Messiah. Since superiors normally baptize inferiors, they argued John was superior to Jesus. (This seems to be why Matthew has the two discuss who should baptize whom.) Yet in spite of such misunderstandings, 3 of 4 writers still included the event. They couldn't narrate Jesus stories without letting us know about the importance of his commitment to Yahweh and its consequences.

Knowing this, what excuse could any Christian give for passing on the Eucharistic cup?

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JANUARY 16, 2011: SECOND SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

Isaiah 49:3, 5-6 I Corinthians 1:1-3 John 1:29-34

We'll never understand why Deutero-Isaiah composed his Second Song of the Suffering Servant if we just listen to it in its liturgical form. I have no idea why verse 4 has been left out of today's first reading.

In his original reflection the prophet can't understand why Yahweh says, "You are my servant through whom I show my glory!" (The word "Israel" was added by a later scribe applying the song to all the Chosen People, just as later Christians applied it to Jesus.) In the omitted verse 4, Deutero-Isaiah tells us why he's so perplexed. "I thought I had toiled in vain, and for nothing, uselessly spent my strength."

Though the prophet is convinced Yahweh has called him to his prophetic ministry, he's just as convinced he's a failure. No one seems to be changing his or her value system because of the message he proclaims.

Once we restore verse 4 to its proper place we also have a key for interpreting our other two readings on a deeper level.

Paul, for instance, begins his first letter to the Corinthians by giving his pedigree: "Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.... " No one can be more certain he's doing what God wants him to do. Yet after we read all the Apostle's letters, we find he often has to deal with failure in his God-given mission. We need only turn to the second half of chapter 11 in this very letter to hear Paul's frustration with the way some in the Corinthian community are celebrating the Eucharist. They're completely ignoring his teaching on the body of Christ. And we can never forget his painful comment in Galatians 4, "I am afraid on your account that perhaps I have labored for you in vain." It's one thing to do what God wants us to do; a totally other thing to succeed in that endeavor.

We must be careful when we deal with the image of John the Baptist expressed in our Christian Scriptures. In the minds of the four evangelists, John has been designated by Yahweh to prepare the way for Jesus. As we hear in today's gospel pericope, he succeeds in doing so, introducing the long-awaited Messiah to everyone in earshot: "Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.. . . Now I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God." No one could be more successful in his or her God-assigned task.

Yet scholars contend this picture of the Baptist is historically inaccurate. Only after his untimely death did Jesus' followers begin to look at him as their mentor's precursor. He probably looked at himself as failing in his primary mission of bringing his people to Yahweh, and helping them make Yahweh's will a priority in their lives. It never crossed his mind that one of his followers, a Capernaum carpenter, one day would be regarded as Yahweh.

All three - Deutero-Isaiah, Paul and John - are proof we can't trust our own judgment on ourselves. It's in the midst of failure that God most seems to be working through these three individuals. After Jesus' death and resurrection Christians quickly began to interpret him through the person and words of the martyred Deutero-Isaiah. The Baptist's failed ministry became the gospel stepping-off point for Jesus' own ministry. And Pauline scholars agree that out of the Apostle's authentic seven letters, the best are those he wrote when he was totally out of control of the churches to whom they were directed.

Almost 50 years after the close of Vatican II, many of us inspired by the vision of church expressed by the majority of the council's participants probably judge our life and ministry as a failure. Yet if we keep living both their and Jesus' dream of reform, I wonder how people 150 years from now will look at our "failure."

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