

2nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Isaiah 49:3, 5-6
<i>Response</i>	Here am I, Lord; I come to do your will.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 40:2, 4, 7-8, 8-9, 10
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 1:1-3
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. To those who accepted him, he gave power to become children of God.
<i>Gospel</i>	John 1:29-34

With Second Sunday in Ordinary Time we turn to the account of St. John the Baptist, and his testimony to Jesus as the Lamb of God. One of the things that you are going to notice about this week is that the gospel for this week is taken from John 1:29-34. Now that should strike you as odd because we are in Year A and this is a Sunday in Ordinary Time. Usually on a Sunday in Ordinary Time during Year A we are going to be getting a passage from the Gospel of Matthew — that's what the whole year is really going to be dedicated to — but if you look at your lectionary you will see that every year on the Second Sunday of Ordinary Time — before we get into whether it's Matthew or Luke or Mark, one of the Synoptics — every year on the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time the Church gives us a reading from the Gospel of St. John. So in Year A and B, we look at John's testimony to Jesus, and in Year C we begin with the Wedding at Cana in the Gospel of John 2.

Why does the Church do that? Well the Gospel of John as you might recall doesn't have a year dedicated to it like Matthew, Mark and Luke, so the Church in a sense sprinkles John throughout the year at certain key places, especially during Lent and Easter, but also here at the beginning of Ordinary Time, because what we are doing in Ordinary Time is we are moving out of the Season of Christmas and we are beginning to reflect on the public ministry once again of Jesus. And John's Gospel, in chapters 1 and 2, gives us some really important information about what happened before Jesus began his public ministry, or at the very beginning of his public ministry. So it's fitting that the Church would take a passage from John on

this Sunday of Ordinary Time at the beginning and focus our attention on it. So today we are going to look at John 1:29-34. This is the Baptist's testimony to Jesus. So we will read it together and then we will unpack it, ask some questions, and see how the Old Testament readings go with this passage. So John chapter 1:29 says this:

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.' I myself did not know him; but for this I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel." And John bore witness, "I saw the Spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him; but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.' And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God."¹

Alright, a number of questions here that this text raises for us, let's just go through a couple of them. Number one, what does John mean when he says that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world? As Catholics we are very familiar with this expression, but what would it have meant in a first century Jewish context for John to say that about Jesus? Number two, why does John say that Jesus came before him and that he ranks before him because he was before him? What does that mean? Number three, this is a really interesting question, how can John say he didn't know Jesus — he says it twice — when he was Jesus' cousin? As we read in the Gospel of Luke 1 and 2, you have Elizabeth who was the cousin of Mary, you have Zechariah and Elizabeth bearing John, and John and Jesus are cousins. So what does he mean "I didn't know him" — and he says it twice? And then finally, what is the meaning of John's testimony to Jesus when he says "I bear witness"? What exactly is that testimony, what is its significance? So let's walk through each one of those together.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

First of all, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Any first century Jew hearing that expression “Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” would've had to Old Testament passages that would immediately spring to mind. The first is from the book of Exodus 12, that is the famous story of the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. I have talked about this in a number of writings and in a number of videos so I'll just get at the basic point here. If your recall in the Bbook of Exodus, it was the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb that not only set the Exodus in motion as the final plague that set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt, but it was also the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb that saved the Israelites from the destroying angel, from the angel of death as it's commonly called, and then allowed them to begin their journey to the promised land. So the Passover Lamb was always associated with deliverance, with rescue, and in particular with deliverance from death. So in this case John is signaling to us that Jesus is going to be the true Passover Lamb. He is going to inaugurate a New Exodus that is going to deliver us not just from physical death but from spiritual death, and it is going to begin our journey toward not the earthly promised land, but the heavenly promised land. So Jesus is a new Passover Lamb and we will see this in various places throughout the Gospel where Jesus will say in chapter 6 “unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man, you have no life in you” — Just like you had to eat the flesh of the Passover Lamb in the Old Testament in order to be preserved from death.

So on the one hand Jesus is prefigured by the Passover Lamb, there's another text here that is very important. It is Isaiah 53, this is Isaiah's famous prophecy of the suffering servant. And the reason that text is behind what John said is because we don't have any text that talks about the Passover Lamb taking away sin. It protects from death, it sets them free from Egypt, but the image of taking away the sin of the world is actually an allusion to the suffering servant. So in the book of Isaiah 53, Isaiah describes this mysterious figure of the servant who will take upon himself the iniquities of all the people, and Isaiah says of the servant that “like a lamb he was led to the slaughter” and that “upon him were the sins of the many,” that “he bore the sins of the many,” an image of taking away the sin of the people. That's the image that John's getting at here. So in a sense what John is doing in this opening statement is revealing that Jesus is the new Passover Lamb of the New Exodus, but he is also the true suffering servant, he's the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecies of this mysterious servant who would take away the sins of the people,

take away the sins of the world by taking them upon himself. That is the first point.

What about the next question? What does John mean when he says “after me comes a man who ranks before me, for he was before me.” That is a weird thing to say about your younger cousin. So if you go back to the Gospel of Luke 1 and 2 you recall that John the Baptist is six months older than Jesus. So in ordinary human terms I wouldn't say of my younger cousin, that he came before me, I would say that I came before him, that would be the ordinary course of things. And yet John here says that Jesus came before him. What does that mean? Well John is pointing here to the mystery of Jesus' divinity. In other words, he is pointing to the fact that although Jesus was born after John in his human body and with his human nature, he is in fact the eternal son of God. Theologians call this pre-existence. In other words, before he became man, the Son — the divine person, the second person of the Trinity — already existed from all eternity. He existed before he assumed a human nature and became man in the incarnation. So the second aspect of John's testimony here is to the divinity of Christ. He's pointing out the fact that although Jesus is coming after him both chronologically, in the sense of his ministry, and biologically, in the sense of his youth, the fact that he is younger, theologically he is before John because he is the preexistent son of God. And you'll know this from John's 1 because how did it begin? “In the beginning was the word, the word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came to be through him.” So Jesus is the eternal son of the Father. He was never created. He had no beginning. He is the Great I Am. He was begotten not made. So on and so forth, all those things pointing to his eternal nature and his pre-existence.

So John here is revealing something very powerful about Jesus. He's manifesting the divinity of Jesus by pointing to his pre-existence. Just to drive this point home — I don't mean to get too technical here, but maybe it will help to be a comparison with us — any human being — me, you, whoever — none of us existed before we were conceived. We didn't have any pre-existence. We didn't come down from heaven into our mother's wombs at our conception. We were directly and immediately created by God at the moment of our conception, soul and body a unity. But Jesus is different because Jesus is an eternal divine person who existed before he assumed that human nature and became man in the womb of the Virgin

Mary. So he is unique among all human beings. He is the only one who had pre-existence. That is what John is getting at here and that's important because his pre-existence shows that he's God and not just man.

What about the next question there? This one has kind of puzzled me for a while. After John describes his account of the spirit coming down upon Jesus, he says “I myself did not know him.” What could that possibly mean when John is Jesus's cousin? Well in this case I actually had to go to the Church Fathers, I went back to look at the living tradition of the Church to see how some of them explained it. It was very interesting. John Chrysostom, who was an ancient Church Father living in the East in Constantinople in the late fourth / early fifth century, pointed out something that I hadn't noticed before. If you go back to the Gospel of Luke, the answer actually can be found in the Gospel of Luke. In the Gospel of Luke 1:80, after it gives the story of the birth of John the Baptist and the blessing of his father Zechariah, at the very end of that story Luke 1:80 makes this really important point about John the Baptist. It says this:

And the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness till the day of his manifestation to Israel.

The Greek word there for wilderness also means the desert and so what Chrysostom and the other Church Fathers said is that John the Baptist did not grow up with his family. He did not grow up in Jerusalem. He grew up in the desert apart from his family and that he only manifested himself to everyone when he began his public ministry at the time of his baptism. So John and Jesus, although they were related, although they were cousins, would not have grown up together. Jesus grew up in Galilee as a carpenter's son but John grew up as an ascetic out in the desert. Now one of the things that's interesting about that is several scholars have pointed out that we know now from the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as in the writings of Josephus, that at the Dead Sea there was a community of Essenes. It was an ancient Jewish sect that were celibate. They were celibate men that practiced various forms of asceticism: fasting, prayer, and reading the Scriptures like a monastic community, like a group of monks. We know from Josephus and others that they actually — although they did not marry and have children there — would take the children of other people and they would raise them in the monastic community. This has happened in monastic communities for

centuries. If you look at Europe, it would often be the case that monastic community's would raise young boys, especially the abandoned children of other people, or parents would dedicate their child or daughter to a monastery or convent and then they would be raised with the monks and nuns. So it appears that the ancient Essenes did this. They would raise children out in the desert and some modern scholars have suggested that that's what happened to John the Baptist. After he was born, his parents dedicated him and gave him to the Essene community and they raised him. We don't know that for a fact, it is speculation. What is not speculation though is that John didn't grow up in Judea. The Bible makes it very clear that he grew up in the wilderness and he was there until his manifestation in Israel.

So if you go back to the Gospel of John now, what is the significance of that point? Well as St. Cyril of Jerusalem pointed out, another ancient Church Father, what John means here is that he did not know Jesus of Nazareth, his cousin, by sight. They did not know one another. They didn't grow up together. And he didn't grow up knowing him as family or a friend. How did he know him? He knew him then not by family relation but by divine revelation. In other words, it's through the appearance of the Holy Spirit and the manifestation at the baptism of Christ that John the Baptist recognizes that this Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God, and the one who has come to baptize in the Holy Spirit. And what St. Cyril of Jerusalem, this ancient Church Father, said was the reason God did that, the reason he separated John the Baptist and Jesus during their childhood and then only brought them together at this moment, was to show that John's identification of Jesus as Messiah and Son of God was not motivated by family preferences or favoritism toward his cousin. He didn't even know his cousin by sight. He only learned his identity as son of God, Lamb of God, through the revelation of the Holy Spirit. So it is kind of an interesting passage there, but you can see very rich here in what's going on at the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist in this particular Gospel. And you can see how this is a fitting way to begin Jesus' public ministry.

Finally, the last point, what is John's testimony? What is he bearing witness to? He is bearing witness to the fact that the spirit descended on Jesus and that therefore he is going to be the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. As we will see elsewhere in the Gospels, John says "there is one who is to come who is mightier than I... I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. I baptize you

with water, he'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit.” So what is the testimony of John in this passage? That Jesus is the one. Jesus is the one that everyone has been waiting for. He is the Messiah, he is the Lamb of God, he is the one who takes away the sins of the world, he's the Savior. So that is the Gospel.

Now with that in mind we can go back to the Old Testament text for this week, which is a prophecy from the book of Isaiah. The first reading is from Isaiah 49 and you won't be surprised now to see that the first reading is a prophecy about the servant of Isaiah. Just like John identified Jesus as the suffering servant, now Isaiah's going to give us an oracle about the servant, and this is what it says:

And he said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified."
But I said, "I have labored in vain,
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the LORD,
and my recompense with my God."
And now the LORD says,
who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him,
and that Israel might be gathered to him,
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength --
he says:
"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the preserved of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”

So why was that reading chosen for the first reading? It is very simple, Isaiah is prophesying about the mission of the servant. What's he going to do? He has come to bring about the salvation of Israel — that's all the tribes that are being referred to there — and of the Gentiles, to be a light to the nations. So when John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the servant, he's revealing his mission as well. He's

going to be the one who takes away the sins, not just of the Jewish people, but of all the peoples of the world. He becomes the savior of the whole world.

And that of course is also the theme for the Psalm for this day. The Responsorial Psalm is Psalm 40 and this Psalm also uses the image of the obedient servant. There are a few verses right in the middle the Psalm in particular that manifest this. In Psalm 40:6-8, a very famous line, says:

Sacrifice and offering thou dost not desire;
but thou hast given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering
thou hast not required.
Then I said, "Lo, I come;
in the roll of the book it is written of me;
I delight to do thy will, O my God;
thy law is within my heart."

So the theme here being the servant who comes to do the will of the Father. The obedient servant who will act in Christ as the Lamb of God, the suffering servant, the one who takes away the sin of the world. And that's really the the essence of the Ssecond Sunday in Ordinary Time. Real quick before I forget, you might be thinking "okay, well what about the second reading here?" There is a reading on this Sunday from 1 Corinthians 1:1-3 and I'm not going to discuss this in this video. You may remember if you were viewing the videos last year, once we get into Ordinary Time, there are actually two tracts of readings that are independent of one another. The first track is the three-year cycle of Gospel readings. In this case we are going to be reading through the Gospel of Matthew and every Sunday of Ordinary Time that Gospel reading is on an independent track that is linked up with the Old Testament and the Responsorial Psalm — just like I just went through with you the Gospel, the Old Testament and the Responsorial Psalm. That is one track. They go together by prophecy and typology, those connections between the old and the new.

The second reading though, during Ordinary Time, is on an independent track reading through the letters of St. Paul in order in what's called semi-continuous reading. A lot of people don't realize this. Many people are familiar with the

three-year cycle of the Gospels: Year A is Matthew, Year B is Mark and Year C is Luke. What people often aren't familiar with is that the writings of Paul are also on a three-year cycle for the Sundays during Ordinary Time. Year A, Year B, and Year C you read through certain letters of Paul in a semi-continuous way during the Sundays of Ordinary Time. So this year, Year A, begins with 1 Corinthians. And for the next few weeks you'll see, the next many weeks actually you'll see, that the second reading is always from 1 Corinthians. However, that reading is in no way connected to the Gospel or the Old Testament of the Psalm, it's on its own track. And so it would take a whole other series of videos for me to walk you through that in order and explain it. So I will leave that for a future date, maybe I can make a series of videos just on preaching through the Pauline letters according to the three-year cycle, but for these videos I am going to focus on the three-year cycle of Gospel readings and how they relate to the Old Testament and the Responsorial Psalm. So in closing then, on the Second Sunday in Ordinary Time, we begin with this testimony to the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, the beginning of his life as a public figure, which in the Catechism of the Catholic Church paragraph 535 says "begins with his baptism by John." So from this point forward we will be moving through the Gospel and straight into the public ministry of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew.