

FIRST READING: 1 John 5:5-13

A reading from the first Letter of Saint John:

Beloved: Who indeed is the victor over the world but the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? This is the one who came through water and Blood, Jesus Christ, not by water alone, but by water and Blood. The Spirit is the one who testifies, and the Spirit is truth. So there are three that testify, the Spirit, the water, and the Blood, and the three are of one accord. If we accept human testimony, the testimony of God is surely greater. Now the testimony of God is this, that he has testified on behalf of his Son. Whoever believes in the Son of God has this testimony within himself. Whoever does not believe God has made him a liar by not believing the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever possesses the Son has life; whoever does not possess the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you so that you may know that you have eternal life, you who believe in the name of the Son of God.

The word of the Lord.

RESPONSORIAL: Psalm 147:12-13, 14-15, 19-20

Praise the Lord, Jerusalem.

Glorify the LORD, O Jerusalem; praise your God, O Zion. For he has strengthened the bars of your gates; he has blessed your children within you.

Praise the Lord, Jerusalem.

He has granted peace in your borders; with the best of wheat he fills you. He sends forth his command to the earth; swiftly runs his word!

Praise the Lord, Jerusalem.

He has proclaimed his word to Jacob, his statutes and his ordinances to Israel. He has not done thus for any other nation; his ordinances he has not made known to them. Alleluia.

Praise the Lord, Jerusalem.

GOSPEL: Mark 1:7-11

+ A reading from the holy Gospel according to Mark:

This is what John the Baptist proclaimed: "One mightier than I is coming after me. I am not worthy to stoop and loosen the thongs of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." It happened in those days that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. On coming up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit, like a dove, descending upon him. And a voice came from the heavens, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Reflection for Thursday after Epiphany January 6

Sometimes when I read any of the biblical Johannine literature, I can get lost in what can sound like double talk. He can use jargon and jargon can be confusing. One must spend time with such passages and unpack them; powerful meaning can be locked in by John's symbolic poetry. Water and blood don't testify. People do. In the last two years of COVID, I have watched a lot of true crime television. Water and blood in these programs are evidence that can lead to prove or disprove a suspect's guilt. What is the testimony of God? How do we hear it? Have you ever heard God speak plainly as in a conversation? God speaks through scripture. God can speak through you and me to someone else; but not in direct speech. We discern the voice of God through prayer and reflection.

The reason anyone would pray to God in the first place is that they believe in God or seek to believe in God. Faith, like life and love, is a gift that God freely gives in God's own time and manner. The desire to pray and reflect is also a gift God gives us. Our desire adds nothing to God but adds God into our lives. Why we believe is not ours truly to know. It's like loving someone. We just do. There may be concrete, identifiable elements that lead to faith and love but why we actually do is a mystery.

If anyone was to discover the means through which we love or believe, these things would be proven and the way to them would be like adding two and two to get four. We could have a cookbook for our relationships. Put in all the ingredients, cook it and then eat it; tasty, but over and done. Faith and love are not like that. They persist and can survive even death. Faith and love are special mysteries and with a manual would lose their specialness and be taken for granted.

John is trying to approach the mystery of faith in a way that sounds solid by putting the unexplainable into words. His symbols and rhetoric fall short in themselves. We believe by God's grace. We love by God's grace. God saves us through our faith; only by God's grace. Nothing we do, make or achieve can gain us these things. Even our desire for God is God's gift. We love God because God first loves us. Like John's text, my words sound like double talk. Yet I believe and witness to God's salvation. I suspect that you do too; you're reading both John and my reflection on him. This is the mystery and grace of God unfolding in real time. Truly a gift.

God has blessed your children within your gates. Within your borders God has granted peace. Jerusalem, in the days of the Psalmist, had walls as borders and gates for egress. The walls acted as protection against invaders and the gates allowed for commerce with people entering and leaving the city. I've seen the border wall that separates Nogales, Arizona from Nogales, Mexico. The city lays smack on the border; half in the United States and half in Mexico. It is a symbol of division, not peace. Exactly what do the Psalm's words mean? Is salvation meant for the few or the many? Didn't Jesus saving act on the cross save the entire human race?

Once and for all God acted to save all of us. God did this in God's own time and in God's own manner. This was not all at once or imposed as an edict. We have come to faith, grown into our experience of God. God saves the human race one person at a time. The peace that God offers us we can discover within ourselves. Then we can share it, as witnesses to others. The world can know us as Christians in the way we love; in peace. Perhaps the borders are within our hearts, minds and souls for that is where we first encounter God's loving presence. The peace that the Psalm has promised is knowing God's presence. God abides in us always and is only a thought away.

The Gospels of Mark and John begin with John the Baptist and Jesus' baptism. Why? There's no story of Jesus' birth in them. Though, we find in John the poem of the pre-existing Word of God who is God become flesh like you and me. Jesus mission and ministry began with his baptism. He was like us in all things but sin. I have to be careful here. As I am composing this reflection, I am also in the process of preparing one for Sunday on this same subject. When you read Sunday's, I may be repeating some of the things I write today. If so, amen (it means so be it). Even with this difference, that Jesus didn't sin, he showed that he was willing to become sin.

That's what he did when he died on the cross; an innocent man who was executed for crimes he could never commit. That was the mission for which Jesus was born; to die as a sacrifice for our sins. He took them on himself as our savior. The process to do that began with his baptism in the Jordan River by the Baptist, John. For Mark, this was Jesus' true beginning; the beginning of his mission and ministry. The sign of truth was Jesus' rising on Easter.

Jesus saw the heavens rip open with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Catholic Dictionary defines power as the magnificent outpouring of love by the Holy Spirit. The voice proclaimed God's love for him that resonated in every fiber of Jesus being. He is the bridge linking God to you and me. How do we come to know God's love? How does the voice of God resonate in us? God speaks to us as God spoke to Jesus, "You are my beloved one; in you I am pleased!" Do we hear God? More importantly do we trust God? Created through God's love and in God's image and likeness, God sees God reflected in each of us. Lord, we believe; help our unbelief.

May Jesus fill all our empty places with God's loving presence.

James D. Beath
January 6, 2022