

2nd Sun day of Year--Cycle A
(Isa 49:3,5-6; 1 Cor 1:1-3; John 1:29-34)

We usually think of Epiphany as comprising three events of Jesus' life: the adoration of the Magi, His baptism in the Jordan, and the marriage feast of Cana, when "he revealed his glory and his disciples began to believe in him." Last Sunday's solemnity of Epiphany commemorated the Magi, the wedding at Cana was reported without fanfare the previous Saturday, and the Baptism of the Lord was celebrated last Monday. So I guess the Epiphany season is officially over.

Yet this "second Sunday of the Year" certainly continues the Epiphany theme. In today's gospel John the Baptist tells to us how Jesus was revealed to him: he saw the Spirit come down on Him, was told that He is the One who will baptize with the Holy Spirit--surely an epiphany for him and also for us.

In this gospel the Baptist identifies Jesus as "the Lamb of God [who takes away the sins of the world]." This fourth gospel displays this identification of Jesus in two ways. When Jesus' crucified body hangs on the cross in death, the soldiers come to break His legs as they had the two thieves, but do not because He is already dead. This, John says, comes about so that the Scripture might be fulfilled: "Not a bone of it shall be broken." This saying occurs not in any prophetic text but in the rubrics for the preparation for the paschal lamb. In this way the gospel identifies Jesus as the paschal lamb, whose blood delivered

Israel from the destroyer.

But Jesus is Lamb of God also as the mysterious "Servant of the Lord" referred to in today's first reading. This Servant figure is found in four passages in the prophecy of Isaiah, four songs or poems of the "servant of the Lord." The first of these songs, introduces the Servant with the words: "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one with whom I am pleased, upon him I have put my spirit; he shall bring forth justice to the nations." The evangelist sees this figure as Jesus, upon whom he saw "the Spirit come down and remain."

The second of these songs, as in today's first reading, speaks of the Servant being called to be "a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." The fourth and last song speaks of the Servant as being unjustly condemned to a shameful death. Those who witness this realize that this one is innocent, and realize, surprisingly, that he suffers for our sins: "we had all gone astray like sheep ...; But the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all." The prophet describes the Servant as "a lamb led to the slaughter," and as giving "his life as a reparation offering." God's statement is, "My servant, the just one, will justify the many." On the basis of this text the Baptist can speak of Jesus as the "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."

Mark and Matthew also identify Jesus as the Servant when, right after Jesus has rebuked the disciples for wanting to be the greatest, He says "whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant; whoever wishes to

be first among you will be the slave of all"; and He gives Himself as example: "For the Son of Man has come not to be served but to serve and [alluding to the fourth Servant song] to give his life as a ransom for the many." John's gospel does not repeat this saying, but he does show Jesus acting out the role of Servant at the Last Supper: there Jesus strips Himself, girds Himself with a towel, as a servant or slave would, and washes the feet of the disciples.

The Servant song, quoted in our first reading, speaks of the Servant's mission as being "even to the ends of the earth." That phrase is echoed early in Acts, when Jesus tells the Apostles they are to bear witness to Him "even to the ends of the earth." Jesus is the Servant, and as Servant His mission is "to the ends of the earth." Yet there is no way He could have fulfilled this mission in His time-and-geographically restricted ministry. Only beyond the resurrection, through a whole body of followers could His message reach to "the ends of the earth." The twelve apostles did an amazing job of this, and Luke may have thought that when Paul had reached Rome (and symbolically the limits of the Roman Empire) the mission to "the ends of the earth" had been fulfilled. But historically, new vistas are constantly being opened-**B**we think, for instance, of the Far East, the New World discovered only centuries later.

Therefore the mission of Jesus the Servant must be carried on by us, His followers. This is a call to true greatness, to carry on the mission of God's Holy Servant. The only way we can fulfill it is to become the servants of

all, just as Jesus was. We know that when Jesus washed the feet of His disciples, he was acting out the role of servant. When He told them that they ought to wash each others' feet, He meant that symbolically--we ought to be willing to serve each other and consider it our highest good. We may not literally serve, in that sense, but at least we must have a willing attitude. If few of us may be able to follow St. Benedict's counsel of considering oneself the "meanest and worst of all," we should at least avoid thinking ourselves as superior to others, should cultivate that humility that will help us love each other and genuinely motivate us to seek and promote each others' good.

Hatred and resentment are contagious, as we have been experiencing in our own culture. However, love and tolerance are even more contagious. Think of the parable of the leaven, that good leaven which gradually permeates the whole.

Do you want God to love you, to forgive your sins, to treat you graciously, to treat your faults patiently and with sympathy? You do? Then do the same to all others. This is how we will carry Christ's mission to the ends of the earth.