

The Baptism of our Lord

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The Baptism of our Lord – Isa 43 1-7 Lk 3 15-33

John's baptism of repentance meant crossing the Jordan River.

Jn 1.28 African-American spirituals about that crossing are about entering life in God's nearer presence – receiving God's gracious rescue from the oppression of slavery because God loves them. And that's what John's baptism offered; a return from alienation into true belonging, embraced in God's love. (We had an experience of unexpected grace when we crossed the Jordan – fee-free border crossings!)

There is a crossing of the Jordan referred to in today's reading from Isaiah which promises freedom from slavery. And the reason for this offer is again God's love. *You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you*, says God. Today's passage from Isaiah has been crafted with amazing care to focus the whole speech on this one, central message... "You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you." Such a focus; such an emphasis! Why?

The oracles from this part of the book of Isaiah ^(40.1–44.23) are set in a time when the Hebrew people had been in exile as captive slaves in Babylon for about forty years. Into this hopeless situation, the prophet Isaiah speaks these words of comfort and blessing. But how can a demoralised people hear such words? Isaiah goes to great lengths to make sure they do.

43.³...I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you, I give peoples in return for you, nations in exchange for your life. But why? What for? I can't help worrying about how the Egyptians, the Ethiopians and

other North Africans fare in this arrangement. And nor can I help thinking about all my Palestinian friends and colleagues preaching on this passage later today with Gaza at war and over four million of their compatriots in their eighth decade of exile from the very same homeland. Is this passage as exclusive and élitist as it sounds?

And to complicate things more, it's one thing preaching to a downtrodden, exiled people about their divine right to their homeland – that's what Isaiah did, and it's what my Palestinian colleagues will do later today too. But it's quite another thing for me to be preaching on the subject of divine right to a land in a situation where we're on the other side of the fence.

And yet both of us – oppressed and oppressor – are addressed by the same scriptures; all of us must listen for the voice of God speaking to us, even through passages like this, abused in the name of Apartheid, militant Zionism and colonial Australia. How can we hear God's voice – all of us?

In the Bible, there are some passages which we call *normative*; key passages which unlock the rest of the scriptures. The key passage in this case is Genesis 12:1-3. ¹Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house *to the land that I will show you*. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and *in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*"

The Land is one of several blessings God promises to Abram's descendants. And among this list of blessings is the reason for them – I will bless you, and make your name great, **so that you will** (imperative) **be a blessing** ... *in you all the families* (species) *of the earth shall be blessed*. God let the Hebrew people cross the Jordan River into the land after the Exodus

from Egypt **so that [they would] be a blessing;** so that in [them] *all the families of the earth [would] be blessed.*

And this is the key which unlocks today's passage from Isaiah. Through the prophet Isaiah, God promised the Hebrew people that they would return from the exile in Babylon; that again, they would cross the Jordan River. ^{43.2} *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you.* The reference to the crossing reminds them of the purpose of God's rescue. They may return **so that [they] will be a blessing;** so that in [them] *all the families of the earth [will] be blessed.* God's purpose for this people that he loved, and loves, remains the same; that ultimately, through them, the divine love which God has for all families of the earth might be revealed.

And that brings us to today – the feast of the Baptism of our Lord Jesus. Baptism was a Jewish initiation ritual which John the Baptist made a restatement of those earlier entries into the Promised Land. To receive John's baptism, Jesus and others had to go to the other side of the river. John's baptism meant bringing Jesus back from this symbolic exile through the waters of the Jordan again; back into the Land.

Jesus and John did what they did in fulfilment of God's command to Abram. This Baptism – this entering the Land – was a gift from God given so that all families of the earth would come to know God's blessing. And it is the constant prayer of the Church that we will fulfil this destiny. The birth, upbringing, baptism, ministry, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus say he enters our exile so that by following him, and leading others to do so too, all families of Earth might enter the Land of God's promise; that is life in all its fulness, and with all its attendant blessings.

As far as my beloved Palestine and Israel are concerned, I ask your prayer that the three descendant tribes of Abraham who call that Land their home, Jews, Muslims and Christians, can hear God's word to them, and particularly to each other: "You

are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you." And "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you *will* be a blessing." And the reason, again, God's love for each of them, and all of us.
Amen