



Baptism of Jesus

THE NEW SHOFAR

This is my beloved Son

For the good of the world – imitate Him

The gods of the nations are not-gods-at-all

In this section of Isaiah the focus of attention now turns from the sins of the nations to a look at the way Israel is living out its covenant responsibilities before Yahweh her God. It is still in a quasi-court setting (Israel is on trial) and our text opens with God presenting His people to those who have gathered together in the court setting...*here is my servant, the one I am upholding.* It comes across as a kind of challenge to the Hebrew people, a pep talk urging them to a stronger and more faithful commitment to living the demands of their covenant with God. It is when and as they strive towards a more faithful life the grace and power of God works away in her.

We need to remember how this is proclaimed to a people still in exile in Babylon. In previous chapters, the prophet has brought to them prophecies about the end of Babylon and the freeing of those held captive in exile. God will raise up a *messiah* in the person of Cyrus king of Persia. Israel is to be freed from prison and returned to their home-land by this pagan ruler. How is that for an amazing theological declaration! The promises and vocation given to Abraham will now be fulfilled through a pagan king and a people who still imprisoned in a foreign land. The point is clear: nothing and no one can stop the saving works of God from unfolding according to the Divine plan. All that is needed is for people to place their trust in their Heavenly Father – in and through whatever of their the circumstances in which they find themselves living and struggling.

God's people are defined in covenant terms

In chapter 41 the prophet speaks of Jacob/Israel/Abraham as being the *servants* of God. This is the inheritance taken up by the Hebrew people in exile. They too are *servants* of God or they are nothing. It is their God who makes them who they are. Look at Babylon. She follows a range of “gods” but when Babylon is destroyed once and for all by Cyrus, what happens to her gods. It is because she has followed gods who are not really gods, she could never endure. Israel, on the other hand, has Yahweh as her God. The love, mercy, power, justice and integrity of Yahweh endure forever, as do those people who cling to Him and obey him. This is the divine promise... *I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. ⁷ I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you (17:6-7).*

The people of the world will come to Me through you

What has never changed throughout Israel's disastrous history is the reason for their calling to be God's people. It is for all of the nations to come to God through the witness of Israel. She is to show the world how their gods are no-gods; how the things they pursue, on which they build their lives and allow to shape the way they live are false. Only Yahweh can fulfill their greatest needs and hopes.

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The divine plan for the salvation of all has never faltered

When God speaks of His plan for creation, the divine words are always couched in the language of promise, of certainty and new hope. The task itself is unimaginably enormous – undoing the sin of Adam and bringing all souls to their proper home in the hands of God. Instead of the pursuit of many “gods”, men and women will fall to their knees in the worship of the only God who can bring justice, mercy and love to all the earth. The reason for this confidence can be found in our psalm (29). After reading that psalm who could doubt the extraordinary power of God that is at work in all the earth, in all who acknowledge and serve God as the One True and Only God of all? Today is all about taking up this power and using it in the service of what God is doing in our lives, in our world.

John the Baptist – another step along the road of salvation

Clearly, the baptism of John was never about the forgiving of sins. For the Jews this was done only through sacrifice and coming to God on the Day of Atonement. Baptism – literally – *washing* – was about making a spiritual commitment to change the way we live in the world. In biblical language it is a sign of the willingness of the person to *repent*. The actual washing/baptism was a sign of what was going on in the heart and what was going to continue once they returned to their homes.

Repenting demands a *turning from* and a *turning to* for it to be authentic. The Hebrew source for the word means to turn around and to head off in a very different direction (*shub* in Hebrew). It involves the whole of a person’s life, every aspect of the way they are living at the moment. *Shub* does not allow for turning just the head and looking in a new direction. It requires the whole of the body turning and moving off regardless of the cost and the consequences of such a transformation.

John – the model servant of God

John does not want to baptise Jesus. Who would? But Jesus demands it because of the need for all men and women to *fulfill all righteousness*, even God’s Messiah. At the beginning of His ministry on earth, Jesus comes to John and confirms His commitment to turn His life from worldly pursuits and to give Himself wholeheartedly to the service of His Father. No longer just a carpenter’s son from Nazareth, the son of Mary and Joseph. He is the *Servant* of God (as per Isaiah) for whom they had been waiting and nothing is going to distract Him from that calling. Fulfilling all righteousness is about the commitment to *producing the fruit* envisaged by John’s baptism.

Then the heavens opened and a voice spoke out

All of these things are then brought together by Matthew – the public commitment and the heavenly response. This is life as demanded by God. It is the way of salvation and Jesus goes ahead of us as the one marking out the way of life through His own ministry of witness. *Do this* is what Jesus is saying and then you will be *claimed* by God and become a collaborator in all God is doing.

Jacob, Israel, Abraham, Cyrus and now *John the Baptist* and finally *Jesus*. This is the point towards which Isaiah was directing the people he served as prophet. Abandon the useless “gods” who promise much and deliver little. *Repent/shub* and make the Christ-like commitment to God and see how life will be transformed and filled with an abundance of blessings, graces and wisdom.

More importantly than just that, live lives of repentance and see how the world is transformed by what God does in us and through us. There is a cost – both John and Jesus were killed on account of their ministries but it was that level of sacrifice that brought about such a richness of blessings for all.

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