

January 11 – Baptism of our Lord

Fr. John Sivalon, MM, Tanzania; United States

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7; Psalm 29:1-2, 3-4, 3, 9-10; Acts 10:34-38; Mark 1:7-11

Fr. John Sivalon, MM, who served in Tanzania, wrote the following reflection. It is also published in [A Maryknoll Liturgical Year: Reflections on the Readings for Year B](#), available from Orbis Books.

In the first reading, we read about people who were in exile or just coming out of exile. Their government had been overthrown; their economic, social and religious life had been disrupted; and they had been carried off. Strangers in a strange land and they had to somehow make sense of it all. The Suffering Servant Song of Isaiah is one attempt at this. Even though they had been bruised as a nation and their fire had diminished they would not break nor would they be quenched. In fact, in their suffering, they had come to see themselves anew as the chosen one but a chosen one with a new sensitivity to being chosen to bring forth justice to all the nations.

Recently, I invited a colleague from Rwanda to talk to my class at the University of Scranton about what it is like to be in exile or to be a refugee. To my surprise she began by emphasizing all the documents she had in her hands that reminded her of her journey and life. She walked into Kenya undocumented, forced to leave her own land for safety. In Kenya she was welcomed but not welcomed. Only after intense interrogation was she given an identity card to carry on her person at all time. If she forgot and found herself being questioned by the police she could be incarcerated or, even worse, returned to Rwanda. Then the UN acknowledged her situation and gave her a document that officially defined her as a refugee. This status allowed her to begin to search out new places to go and settle. This eventually led her to Canada where as a refugee she was given permanent residence status (another document) and then eventually citizenship (yet another document).

When we talk about people as undocumented we often fail to recognize how threatening that is for those who were forced to leave their own country for economic or political reasons. Without documents, this colleague lived in fear not knowing what could happen at any moment if she was stopped by militia, police or security. If by chance a neighbor harbored some grudge against her, she had no protection from what could befall her if that person made any false accusations to security forces. Documents came to define her identity.

The idea of universality is carried forward in Luke's description of Peter's words, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality." Peter was visiting Joppa when he had a vision of being told to kill and eat the various "unclean" animals lowered in front of him. On resisting, he was told, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane" (Acts 10:15). Meanwhile, a God-fearing Roman centurion in Caesarea had had a vision suggesting he send for Peter. The emissaries arrived as Peter was puzzling over the meaning of the vision. Peter went to Cornelius and recognized that "God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him" (Acts 10:34-35). This was confirmed by reception of the Holy Spirit by Peter's hearers and their baptism.

Peter had to face the criticism of those in Jerusalem who believed that it was necessary for all believers in Jesus first to enter the Jewish faith and keep within its ways. He exemplifies the conversion that all of us are called to when it comes to our taken-for-granted understandings of the world around us. It is just the way it is. For example, traveling through South Africa during the apartheid era, I was amazed and

often just said to myself, why can't they see how absurd this strictly enforced separation is? Why is it that this African woman isn't allowed to sit on the same bench that I am as we wait for our documents? Why is it that in this country filled with lush land, Africans are given the rocky hillsides as their homeland? Why is it that this elderly peaceful gentleman needs to be smuggled into the area in which we are staying to meet us in the basement in order to stay out of sight? What threat is he? Our prejudices and biases are blinders that keep us from seeing the absurdity of our actions. In Cornelius, Peter came to discover that those blinders were in fact hindering him to see God and God's loving embrace of all cultures.

Finally, we find the image of an Essene-like character, John the Baptist, in the desert separated from the forces of Roman imperial rule and those Jewish elements who had decided to cooperate or collaborate with their oppressors. Mark's Gospel begins by taking us back to Isaiah to understand that Jesus is the fulfillment of this Suffering Servant and that his salvific mission is meant for all. The setting itself though is probably more significant than anything else in the reading. It is a desert, but for John the Baptist it is a refuge from the oppression, disgrace and blasphemy that he perceives in having Roman authorities governing his land and influencing his faith.

Going back to the first example, for various reasons, hundreds of people are seeking refuge in any place that they might find it. Our homeland, the United States, once known as a haven of refuge for the oppressed and poor, is now seen as increasingly xenophobic and unwelcoming. I was with a lawyer recently who I hadn't seen for over 10 years. Innocently, I asked her if she was still working with immigration cases. "Oh God no!" she replied with disgust. Taken aback I asked her why? Again to my surprise she said that it just became increasingly difficult to help people. "The laws became more complicated, the bureaucracy more cumbersome and the political will so compromised that you just could never get anything through to allow someone to stay. And these were people who really deserved help and who really needed to be helped. I could only take so much of seeing the disappointment and despair in their faces. This was not because of 9/11. Sadly, America began to change long before 9/11."

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