

CUI BONO?

A Sermon for the Baptism of Jesus, Year C, January 10, 2010

If you don't recognize the Latin phrase I am using for the title of this sermon, it means "For whose good?" "Who benefits?" The question is sometimes asked in an effort to determine who might conceivably have committed a crime, because they intended to benefit from it.

Cui bono?

That's what I want to know, when I hear the precious words of Isaiah's prophesy.

When the prophet prophesies for God: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you," I want to know for whom these words are intended. Are they for me? Is this God's promise to me?

There are a lot of sweet promises in that first reading. "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you," so far so good, "I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life." Hold on here. There seem to be two sets of people. The children of Israel, to whom these words are addressed, and then Egypt, Ethiopia, and Seba, whom the Lord would willingly give up in order to purchase Israel.

So, if I am a part of the people of Israel, lucky me. If not, too bad. I am not (according to this prophesy, anyway) precious to God. The benefits of this promise would seem to accrue to other people, not me. I'm not one who walks dry-shod through the Red Sea. Instead, I'm riding in a chariot and I get drowned.

In the psalm, the all-powerful voice of God is invoked for the purpose of—in the last line—giving the blessings of peace. That's great. Except it says "to your people." So, again: Who benefits? Can I slip inside somehow and become a beneficiary of the Lord's powerful words of blessing? I hope so. But how can I know?

Thirdly, look at the Gospel reading. Think about the heavy import of the words that come out of the heavens, aimed at Jesus standing praying in the river after his baptism. So we are sure who the words are about, a dove descends upon him, the Holy Spirit in bodily form. A voice comes from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Well, that's fine for *Jesus*, I'm sure. He hasn't even done anything we know of yet, and he already has an unlimited open line of credit with the Father in Heaven.

But how about me? It doesn't do me any good if God considers Israel his chosen people, does it? Or if God says that Jesus is perfect?

John the Baptizer has told me that Jesus is coming to sort us out. "The wheat he will gather into his granary, and the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Well, I have "chaff" written all over me. So where does it leave me, if God is "well pleased" with Jesus. I *guess* he ought to be pleased with his own Son!

Is there any way I can slip in and obtain the benefits being poured down from heaven above? Do I just read the Scriptures and hope they pertain to me? Do I try to act like a good person,

and seek to capture God's attention? How about if I really improve a lot? Are there rewards for "most improved"?

People live evaluated lives. There is no way around it. We assess others, they assess us. And it is not just individual actions that get measured as good or bad, it is our selves. Our persons.

And the more carefully and honestly we scrutinize ourselves, *or* others, the less likely we are to believe that we are wheat. The more likely we are to feel like chaff—like people who could have been wheat, except that, etc.

There is no one living who does not have an appetite for the kind of affirmation Jesus got from above, at the Jordan. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It takes a lot less than that, in the way of affirmation, to make my day. For, to use the words of David, "I know my faults; and my sin is ever before me."

What if we could know that the words of Isaiah's prophesy were meant for us? And the "blessings of peace" mentioned in the Psalm? And if God would say to us, personally, "you are my beloved child; I am pleased with you."

But how could God be pleased with me, if even I know better?

The answer has to do with baptism. In baptism, as it says in Titus, Jesus "saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is sure."

Baptism is "an outward and visible sign" of an invisible and inward work which God does in us through his Son Jesus Christ, by which we who *stood outside of the stream of his blessing because of our own sin* become heirs to the prophesy in Isaiah, and everything else God promises to those who believe in him.

"The saying is sure," as it says in Titus, because the voice that is saying it is the voice in Psalm 29, which creates the world and makes it jump around, which "makes oak trees writhe"! Oak!

When the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. The two went down and prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (for as yet the Spirit had not come upon any of them; they had only been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus). Then Peter and John laid their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

I'm not sure what all of that means, except that it is clear that the early Christians wanted to make sure that everyone was standing all the way under the shower of blessing. No one should just affiliate with Jesus, by himself. They should understand and believe that in Jesus, they were participating in God's own work of reconciling the world to himself.

Jesus came, he saw (and wept); he died (and conquered). Cui bono? For you and me, and for anyone who is willing to receive it, no matter what apparent difficulties stand in the way, which is to say sin.

Amid the changes and chances of this mortal life, you and I often find our value threatened, sometimes with cause and sometimes for no good reason, by other people and by things that happen to us. Do not fear, God says to all of us. I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you (going through the waters myself); and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.

How do we know?

Because God paid for us with people. With a person, to be exact. With his own Son. He traded him—into death—for us, to win back our love and to make us his people, in a fellowship with all his people.

All this he has done for my benefit. For our benefit. For all who are willing to receive it. Amen.

