

## Homily by Deacon Jim Olshefski

### Baptism of the Lord – Year A - January 11, 2026

The four **Servant Songs** are poetic passages in the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1–4; 49:1–6; 50:4–11; 52:13–53:12) which describe a mysterious "Servant of the Lord" who suffers, atones for others, and is ultimately exalted. These poems detail the Servant's mission to bring justice, light, and redemption, despite enduring abuse and suffering for the sins of others. Early Church Fathers Augustine and Irenaeus and St. Thomas Aquinas among others, interpreted this "suffering servant" from a Christological perspective as prophesying about the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Today's reading from Isaiah begins with the first Servant Song; appropriate for today since this song focuses on the Servant's gentle mission of healing and justice and his divine authority which is disclosed to all in today's Gospel passage of Jesus' baptism, culminating when God's voice echoes the words from Isaiah in the first reading—"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus is an agent of God's will, who quietly and humbly brings forth justice—"not crying out, not shouting, not making his voice heard on the street." He seeks to free the innocent from bondage. God's Spirit sent him to heal and strengthen the weak, to mend and restore the hearts of all who are losing hope or have been cast aside by the rich and the mighty. He is a light to the nations. Through this Servant's ministry, the "bruised reed"—those who are weak—are strengthened and the "dimly burning wick"—those whose faith is lacking—are enflamed. The Servant himself will never wane or weaken; he will faithfully accomplish the will of the Lord and establish justice in the land.

We're all called, through our baptism, to do the same: To be a gentle agent of God's will, to serve others and bring forth justice with humility. A good example for us to follow is Cornelius, the Roman Centurion in the second reading from the Acts of The Apostles. Cornelius, a "devout and God-fearing" gentile, who gave alms generously and prayed to God constantly, had a vision from God as did St. Peter. As a result, they were brought together as we heard in today's reading. In a pivotal moment for the future of Christianity, St. Peter proclaimed "that God shows no partiality. Rather, in every nation whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him." Afterward, St. Peter baptizes **Cornelius and his whole household**, the first gentile converts, thereby opening the Gospel to the gentiles, to all non-Jewish people.

Our world is full of people like Cornelius, those who exemplify what it means to be Catholic and who bring others into the faith, and they're hiding in plain sight, all around us. Do you know any?

I do and his name is Howard. I know Howard through Scouting and our former parish. Howard is a pillar in his community, who for decades attends Mass with his family and supports his parish and a multitude of other worthy causes. Howard lives the Scout Law: He's trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty, brave, clean, and reverent. He is a positive role model, a shining beacon, to adults and children alike. Many years ago when I was working with our elder son, 9-years old at the time, on his Cub Scout religious award, **Parvuli Dei**, which means "Children of God," we had a father-son discussion about people who live the Scout Law and are like Cornelius—devout, God-fearing, humble and a servant to all. Without further prompting, John simply asked "You mean like Mr. Howard?" **Out of the mouths of babes!** All I could say in return was "Yes, John, just like Mr. Howard."

Little did I know how much Howard was like Cornelius until years later when I found out he had been baptized as a non-Catholic Christian but now wished to practice his faith as a Roman Catholic. He was joyfully welcomed into the Church after completing the process now called the Order of Catholic Initiation for Adults (OCIA),

much to the surprise of many parishioners who just assumed, since he was a faithful participant at Mass with his family all those many years, that he was Catholic all along! All those years and Howard—a non-Catholic—was more Catholic, more like Cornelius, than many Catholics I knew.

While Jesus is the ultimate Suffering Servant, we, members of his Church—the Mystical Body of Christ—are called to participate in his mission here today by humbly serving others without regard to personal cost, raising up the weak and supporting the faith of those around us, thereby being instruments of God’s healing and justice in the world.

We’re called to be like Cornelius; to be like Howard.