



**Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York**

The Reverend Andrew C. Mead, OBE, DD, *Rector*
John Scott, LVO, D. Mus., *Organist and Director of Music*
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, January 9, 2005

The Baptism of Our Lord

Festal Eucharist

at 11am

+

A Sermon by

The Reverend Robert H. Stafford

on

Matthew 3:13-17

+

A SERMON FOR THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD

...This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

For those of you familiar with Dickens' David Copperfield, remember Uriah Heap, the fellow who said, "I am a very umble person"? (Charles Dickens, David Copperfield, NY, Pollard & Moss, 1888, Vol I, p. 242). Humble, he is not! This smarmy character of nineteenth century literature, whose name in the English language is synonymous with hypocrisy and ingratiating insincerity, is a caricature of masquerading willfulness, the pretence of caring by one who thwarts the happiness and good of others, a moral admonition from the author of the tale warning that what might look like truth in life, sometimes, is not. I mention Uriah Heap, because I want to approach this feast day, the baptism of our Lord, by talking about the exact opposite of what Heap represents in human nature, that being, humility. Particularly, this morning, I want to speak about the unique and true humility of Christ, which is central to our understanding of today's Gospel, one of the most beautiful in the record of Christian Scripture.

When we look carefully at Matthew's account this morning, what is immediately apparent is the imbalance initially present in the story. It is Jesus who comes to John for baptism (3.13). In a Mediterranean culture acutely aware of honor and position, John attempts to correct the misplaced protocol of the situation, saying that it is he himself who is in need of Christ's baptism (3.14); Jesus being the ultimate baptizer. Yet, contrary to John's protest, as well as contrary to the custom and understanding of this world as to rank and importance, Jesus submits to the baptism of John. This is a deliberate and intended inversion of the honor we normally confer upon one another and is done to fulfill what Christ terms "...all righteousness..." (3.15). The mystery of what is occurring in these opaque words is very beautiful, subtle and important. So, what does this saying mean, "...thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness..."? Let me try this morning to provide an answer to that question in the context of humility and to explore its implications for us as witnesses of the baptism of our Lord.

The point I want to make is the point of the Gospel, that Christ submits to the baptism of John, because the core nature of Jesus is perfect humility or surrender. Christ is congruent to his being. First of all, he is completely faithful to the will of His Father. And, secondly, [here we have to think back to the Feast of the Incarnation just concluded], he is in the words of the Prologue to John's Gospel, the Word... made flesh (1.14); therefore, Christ is totally faithful in his identification with the world. Christ is, therefore, truth. Thus, the baptism of Jesus by John is vicarious; something Christ is doing to fulfill God's word on behalf of the world. If God's

word is mercy and hope, Christ is baptized by John so that the people, places, things, and events of this world – you and I – may be recreated in the new life of God’s righteousness. This is because it is the world, the fallen garden of the old creation, that Jesus carries with him into the waters of the Jordan. What Jesus, the new Adam, does today in perfect surrender is to make of the world – its people, places, things, and events -- a sacrament, that is to say, an offering that contains the gratuitous, hidden presence of God. This is a parallel to the Feast of the Incarnation. But, instead of grace coming down from heaven, the direction is reversed. In the baptism of Christ, the people, places, things, and events of the world – you and I -- are taken up to heaven -- the Incarnation and the Baptism of Christ being essentially the same act!

Humility, therefore, is not only Christ’s identity, what I have said is the intimacy he shares with his Father and his faithfulness to this world, humility is also his destiny. We see this destiny in the ministry that begins immediately after his baptism and for which he is anointed by the Holy Spirit prior to the pronouncement “...This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (3.17). For example, later in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says, “‘Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart’” (11.28-29). In these words, we see that the humility that is Christ speaks of comfort for the weary, refreshment for anyone who turns to him. This is not Uriah Heep speaking! And, herein is the importance of what I am saying, that the destiny of Jesus, his anointing by the Holy Spirit, is that of the Messianic one, the Son of God and Son of Man, an epiphany of the one for whom the world has waited and who proclaims a new creation born out of the ruins of old life. Christ, the messiah, comes in truth with an invitation to see the world of people, places, things, and events with new eyes, the refreshing and comforting eyes of mercy and hope, for he has the eyes of his Father, where humility/surrender to the love and power of God is the way to an everlasting kingdom already here but not yet fully revealed.

The Apostle Paul writing in his Letter to the Colossians, reminds the reader that as Christians we live in a world where there can ultimately be no bad news, since we already participate in a new creation of eternal life through Christ’s baptism. His admonition is to look for ...things which are above... “...for you have died...” [he says] “and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (3.3). This is to say that the sacrifice Christ establishes in his baptism by John, Christ fulfills in his sacrifice upon the cross, the waters of baptism being intrinsically and forever mixed with the blood of his passion, death, and resurrection, the humility of the Son of God washing creation in the new life of mercy and hope. The Apostle Paul is also saying that in Christ, we inherit, as adopted children of a heavenly Father, an eternal victory that is without Christ’s baptism, death, and resurrection, impossible for us to attain. This triumph is ours as gift, gift of God’s gracious humility. And, as victors, we now look to another world in faith and for refreshment in order to live less fearfully in this world which is passing away, because all that is hidden in the love of God.

Fidelity to this already-but-not-yet kingdom is difficult, I think. And, I am reminded of an encounter recently with a lady who stopped me as I was leaving the front doors of the church. She said, “It’s getting worse, isn’t it?” “What’s getting worse?” I replied. [I thought she was talking about my preaching!] “The world,” she said, “the world is getting worse.” These words, I think, indicate a crisis of soul, the pinch of reality bearing down upon our heart that we all experience in a world where suffering often looms larger than mercy and hope. Perhaps this is what the Victorian poet Gerard Manly Hopkins means, as a line of his poem, “Thou Art Indeed Just, Lord” comes to mind. It is a plea and prayer during the dry times of one’s spiritual journey, “O Thou Lord of life, send my roots rain” (p. 1246, Norton II). Here Hopkins composes a simple intercession for refreshment and recreation, a humble petition for new life. As Christians whose spiritual roots need rain day by day, we all must wonder if our faith is little more than resigned submission to make-believe in a world where darkness often appears more real than the grace of God. Here is where, I think, we enter willingly the waters of today’s Gospel with the understanding and faith that God’s grace is given to humble men and women of every generation who are heavy laden and in need of comfort. God, it appears,

seems to prefer the humble to the haughty, the anawim as they are known in Scripture, the lowly or outcast, to the proud and the powerful. This is not because they are better or that poverty is blessed, but because they are simply willing, less encumbered and fettered by the distractions of life. And, like his Son, God wants us to see that in our humility is our destiny, our vocation and the power God promises to give us so that we may be mercy and hope to the people, places, things, and events of our daily life – power to be sacraments of the divine life and keepers of eternal things.

I've said a lot this morning, so let me now summarize the three things I have said about the Baptism of Christ. 1) Humility is not a virtue or an activity of timidity we pursue. We don't get up in the morning and proudly say, "I'm going to be humble today." It is something that happens to us, a truth we encounter and through which we are willing to let the love of God possess us. 2) God possesses us so that God can do in us that which we cannot do by ourselves. And, 3) I have tried to say what Teresa of Avila said, "To say that we abandon our will to another's will seems very easy until through experience we realize that this is the hardest thing one can do if one does it as it should be done." In other words, surrender to the love of God is the most difficult human endeavor. It sets our feet on life's greatest adventure, a journey to another shore.

I close by suggesting three things we can do mindful of today's Gospel. And, I look to three poets of the modern era for inspiration; Eliot, Blake, and Tennyson. 1) Do not confuse humility with quietism or isolation. It is a desire or willingness to struggle toward what is right or true. "The world turns and the world changes/...[writes T S Eliot in his poem, *The Rock*] But one thing does not change./ In all my years, one thing does not change./ However you disguise it, this does not change: The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil" (I, p. 98, Complete Poems & Plays, Harcourt). This struggle is in Eliot's mind especially true in our confrontation with the gods of usury, lust, and power. These are the temptations to which we are all vulnerable. 2) The 18th century poet and mystic William Blake comes to mind. Here is a man, who as a child claims to have seen God looking in at him through a window. And, once, he saw angels filling a tree, like birds perched on its limbs. Blake was a poet who saw in ordinary things like a rose, a tiger, a sunflower, extraordinary things and meanings not of this world. Was he delusional or was he a visionary? This is the fine line that exists between madness and sainthood. In his poem, "The Clod and the Pebble" he says, "Love seekth not Itself to please,/ Nor for itself hath any care/ But for another gives its ease/ And builds a Heaven in Hell's despair" (cf., The Songs of Experience, Norton II, p. 53). Love, he tells us, is the work of humility. Love transforms. And, God is love, Christ commending us to love as he does; God, neighbor, and self as one. In ordinary people, places, things, and events, a Christian looks for love, acts in love. And, 3) prayer and meditation on the baptism of Christ reveal that the miracle of eternal life has already begun. To the darkness of this world, light has come. And here, the nineteenth century poet, Tennyson, in his poem *In Memoriam* comes to mind, in which he grieves the death of his beloved friend and invokes God for strength and comfort, saying, "Help thy vain worlds to bear thy light" (ln 52, Intro, p. 751, Norton II). To our vain world, to the vanity of our own lives, Christ the light of nations and men has come. And, we are called as witnesses, to bear his light of mercy and hope to the people, places, things, and events of this world. Like him, we are anointed to live the brightness of love. "Happy are the people that are in such a state..." [writes the Psalmist], "yea, blessed are the people who have the Lord for their God" (144.15)!