

Sermon preached by Revd M.J. Elliott
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10 January 2010

In the annual cycle of life at the Theological Institute we are about to hit the curacy interviews and I was reminded of the story of a young deacon who was asked by his rector to go and do some visits in a local nursing home. When he got there he soon realised that one rather elderly lady had not fully recognised the fact that he had come from the local parish church. He addressed her as follows 'Excuse me do you not know who I am?' She looked at him rather quizzically and said 'Son I have that problem too. Don't worry about it, go and see the matron and she will tell you who you are'.

Identity and self understanding are part and parcel of who we all are. One of the difficulties of advancing years is that some people tragically lose that awareness of self. However, the greater point this morning must be that in order for other people to get to know us in the first place they cannot simply resort to hear say, Face book or any other media, ultimately each one of us must choose to disclose who we are, and on the basis of that self disclosure bonds of affection, friendship and community can be established.

All of which brings us to the heart of this new season in the church calendar, the season of Epiphany. After the waiting and anticipation of Advent, and following the wonder and joy of Christmas, Epiphany confirms for us the fullness of who Jesus really is, and nowhere is that more clearly seen than in the account of His baptism. The context of the verses read earlier from Luke chapter 3 is that John the Baptist has been sent as a forerunner to prepare the way for the Messiah and it is fascinating how even from John's own message there is no doubt but that the One coming after him would be the Lord himself 'I baptise with water, He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire' - who else could do that but Yahweh? 'His winnowing fork is in His hand, He will gather the wheat into His granary but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire' - who else might that point to but the one who rightful judge of all the earth?

The scene is set. And so as Jesus arrives to take His place He then chooses to undergo John's baptism, not in order for Him to express repentance-for what sins did the sinless one need to repent?-no the baptism happens as an opportunity for this great moment of testimony to who Jesus really is. The heavens are opened, the Holy Spirit descends in bodily form like a dove and the voice from heaven declares in unmistakable terms 'You are my Son, the beloved and with you I am well pleased'. In contrast to the misguided children of Abraham with whom John has been dealing, here we have the true Son and that analogy towards the old covenant is reinforced by the very fact of Jesus passing through the waters of the river Jordan, just as Israel had done in entering the promised land.

I would imagine we all have our own views as to the identity of Jesus Christ-a good man, a great teacher, one of the most significant figures in human history. Can any of those do justice to that with which we are confronted here? He is the Lord, He is the hoped for redeemer, this is God amongst his people.

But then secondly, not only do we discover here who Jesus is, if we look more closely at the words of God the Father it is also disclosed to us the reason why He has come. The reference in the first part of verse 22 is to Psalm 2 (one of the Messianic Psalms), however in the second part the words are taken directly from Isaiah 42-1 (the song of the suffering servant). as we put these together, we begin to realise that the one who has been promised, the Messiah, is also the one who is willing to undergo rejection and suffering. The reason why Jesus has come is not to live His life, but in fact supremely to lay down His life. Everything about His birth, His baptism and His ministry which is about to unfold would find its fulfilment in His death upon the cross and as Christian people, every time we gather, we celebrate what He has done for us.

A few years ago a well know Bishop was asked in the context of a public debate if he could explain the difference between religion and Christianity. The two are so regularly conflated and confused. After a moment's thought he answered 'I will tell you the difference-human religion is spelt D.O. (its all about what I try to do, I try to be a good person, I try to be a kind neighbour, I try to make myself acceptable to God). Christianity is spelt D. O.N E. at the heart of the gospel is not what we do but rather what God in Christ has done for us.

So we are reminded of who Jesus is, of why He has come and we are brought finally in these verses to the only appropriate response, which is also seen in the words of John 'one more powerful than I is coming. I am not worthy to untie the thong of His sandal. Allow me as I finish to share with you one further background detail. In the world of the first century slaves and slavery were an accepted norm. According to custom if you owned a slave you could expect that slave to do almost anything, except for one thing. Even in such a culture it was considered beneath common decency to demand a slave to untie the thong of your sandals, and that knowledge makes these words of John the Baptist even more remarkable. Referring to the One coming he says, with regard to Him, 'I am not worthy to do the one thing which even a slave could never be expected to do'. Such lowliness, such self abasement, and if John as the last and greatest in the line of the prophets needed to say that, how much more ought we not to humble ourselves before this Christ who discloses himself to us as our deliver, our king and our God.

Prayer (From the Mozarabic Sacramentary)

We pray thee almighty God open the hearts of thy people to thy law and give us humility to receive thy truth. What ever our mortal tongue hath uttered for the salvation of souls do thou Oh Lord in thy mercy make acceptable. Speak thou from Heaven and give us life so that together we may be counted worthy to attain unharmed thy Son, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.