

THE MINISTRY BEGINS JANUARY 13, 2008

The Christmas Season has passed with all its celebrations, music and story telling through pageants, word and song. Now we are in the time when once again we begin to review the life and work of Jesus. Though we have discussed this life and work of Christ many times, there is always fresh material for us as we look again at the scriptures which recorded his life.

The four gospels each stress key aspects of his life. St Luke in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles also refers to Jesus life and its events. Paul in his letters speaks as well of the impact and meaning of the life, words and acts of Jesus. Taken together, the New Testament, grounded in the Old Testament, offers rich glimpses in the life and teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel reading today refers to the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. Matthew narrates how Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan specifically to be where John was busy baptizing people who wished to repent and lead a new and godly life. John sees Jesus coming to the river to be baptized and stops dead short. He says to Jesus before he could say a word: "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" He is surprised to see Jesus and very nervous to think Jesus would want him to baptize him. John felt very unworthy and confused. Also, if Jesus was God's Son, would he not be sinless and therefore not in need of baptism?

But Jesus assured John that it was appropriate and that he wanted this act of baptism as he begins his new ministry. Scholars have debated across the centuries as to why Jesus asked for baptism. Perhaps Jesus was marking the beginning of his active ministry by submitting to this act of John's. Jesus may have thought: now I leave home and my work begins in earnest. I have very little time and so much to accomplish.

In a sense Jesus was giving up the comfort of home and becoming a homeless man, one who was to roam across Palestine preaching, teaching and healing with no home of his own.

Jesus also sought baptism because, with a growing and deepening sense of destiny, he knew that God had some commission to lay upon him. Perhaps he also believed that the voice of God might come through the ministry of his brave cousin John who was disciplined in righteousness. And it happened as Jesus expected. His ministry was confirmed at that act and Jesus felt the presence of God in a sure and strengthening way as Jesus began his own ministry.

When we look at the beginning of Jesus ministry, it is not irreverent to assume a slow clarifying of Christ's mind, a deepening awareness during his years in Nazareth that God had for him a destiny and a destiny-making task. We wish we could have been there to see and experience for ourselves this dawning of what lay before him that Jesus was experiencing. Jesus moved steadfastly forward to accept the role he was to play.

Think of what this realization of what lay ahead was about. We can but guess the inward stirring, the flash and flame, by which he slowly knew that he must walk a path awful and alone in human history. Perhaps he was finally sure, as he went to be baptized, that this soul-shaking moment was at hand. It was his destiny.

Into this moment of baptism in an earthly river, God's voice invaded the occasion with these words: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Let us look at the words of Matthew again: he says the Spirit of God descended like a dove, lighting on Jesus. It reminds us of the Creation story when the Spirit of God brooded over the primeval chaos to bring order and light.

Thus the seal had been set; the commission had been given to Jesus by a loving father creator.

So, as we see here, John baptizes Jesus with water; God lays claim on Jesus as his beloved son in whom he was well pleased.

The ministry had begun. The commission of God had been confirmed. Jesus has accepted this task. Now, there could be no turning back for Jesus. His face was pointed to his work. He was keenly aware that time was of the essence.

In our other reading this morning from the Book of Acts, we have Peter, the great preacher Apostle, speaking to the household of Cornelius, the gentile. Cornelius had invited him into his home. Normally a Jew would not accept this invitation but Peter felt compelled by God to go to him. Peter starts off saying that he has perceived that it is not God who shows partiality towards some and not others. God is with all who turn to him anywhere with respect, understanding and love.

Peter refers back to the baptism of Jesus. Peter states that Jesus was anointed by God at the baptism and filled with the Holy Spirit and power. As a result says Peter, Jesus went about doing good and healing all, for God was with him. This led to Jesus' death on the cross. God raised him up again and brought him to glory. Peter is a witness along with others to Jesus' acts. God confirmed Jesus to be the judge of the living and the dead. All would be offered forgiveness through the life, death and resurrection of this Jesus.

As Peter spoke in the house of Cornelius, the Holy Spirit fell on everyone in the room, whether circumcised or uncircumcised. Peter boldly pointed this fact out to all present and said that God showed no partiality. God's love as manifested in and through Jesus was available to all who believed.

These two stories speak to us today about how as Christians we should act. Most of us were baptized as babies. Our parents and grandparents normally were a part of the church life and baptism was expected. Many families even had special baptism clothes which each child in turn wore. We used the term "christening" for infant baptism. This term christening harkens back to Christ's baptism when God placed his mark upon him through the words "This is my beloved son."

The tradition grew through the centuries that God's mark was placed on the baby through this act and the baby was now safe from hell should anything untoward happen to the child and early death occur. People panicked if the child was not baptized quickly as they feared for the immortal soul of their child. Thus the term christening grew in usage meaning marked by Christ.

We no longer believe that the act of child baptism is required for salvation. We emphasize that God is the loving Creator who created all human beings regardless of sex, race or faith. God does not require any act by us to ensure his love is possible.

But like Christ, we seek baptism for our children or for ourselves as adults for it points to and affirms our belief in God and our desire to be counted among the Christian saints on earth and in heaven.

The story of Peter in the house of Cornelius is also important as it reminds us that we are not in an elite group of people guaranteed to be with God as opposed to others outside the pale. Peter said God shows no partiality to anyone for he created all and loves all. Having said this, Peter goes on to remind us that a relationship with God is only meaningful and alive if we work at it.

We cheat ourselves if we rest on our laurels by saying God created me, he loves me and that is the way it is. There is so much more, so much richness in this relationship to discover if we cultivate our faith.

This sounds like drudgery when it is said like this, but we know in life that we become more skilled as we practice and open ourselves up to learning and at times disappointments.

I am the Lord your God, saith the Lord. This old phrase was used always in services as a reminder that God knows who he is and invites us into a rich and growing faith relationship with him. Enter into the joy of your Lord was another phrase we used. This emphasized that a relationship with God was not one based on our fear but based on wanting to be a part of the joy of God who sees things as good and filled with rich possibilities of renewal and growth.

The ministry of Jesus begins anew in 2008 and we will walk as a congregation beside Jesus in faith, excitement and joy.

I wish you all a joyous and nourishing journey ahead. I look forward to rejoining your journey in April as together we walk in hope and faith into the future.

Rev. Gary Magarrell