

Baptism of the Lord

Across the centuries, a controversy has boiled concerning the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Was he man or was he God? At one time we have emphasized his deity; at another time, his humanity. One of the earliest problems with which the church had to deal was what is known as the Gnostic Heresy. This was a form of Christian thought, influenced by Greek philosophy, which emphasized the deity of Christ but completely discounted his humanity. Now there seems to be a tendency to proclaim his humanity to the disadvantage of his deity. Somehow, we have never been able to stretch our minds around the truth that he is both God and man.

It is predictable that we would have that kind of problem. We do not fully understand God or man. How could we hope to completely comprehend the God-man? We will not resolve that problem today; in fact, we will not even try. We will simply affirm our faith that Christ is the Son of God, above us and beyond us; then we will deal with the truth that he is also one of us.

Both truths are highlighted in our Gospel reading for today. First, we see Jesus as he was baptized along with common people just like ourselves. Then we are told that the Holy Spirit descended on him in visible form like a dove, and a voice from heaven said: "This is my beloved Son." On one hand he identified with the

human race; on the other heaven proclaims him to be God's own Son.

The baptism of John was a symbol of repentance of sin. In this sense, it had no meaning for Jesus. He had no sin of which to repent. Still he was baptized, identifying himself with the sinners he had come to save. His baptism is a declaration of his membership in the human race. We have a kinship with him that runs far deeper than most of us realize. We, of course, cannot relate to his sinless perfection. That is so far beyond us that all we can do is stand in awe. But there are other areas of life where he belongs to us and we belong to him.

Take, for example, his statement concerning greatness. You recall that he said, "He who is greatest among you shall be your servant." That was his essential ethic.

And this is a point where some would say that Jesus and the human race have little or nothing in common. He defined greatness in terms of usefulness; we tend to define it in terms of wealth and fame and power. But is that really true? Is that what we truly think?

Suppose I were to stand here today and tell you that the great men of history were the greedy and the mighty. Suppose I were to name them - Napoleon, Hitler, or Genghis Khan. You would think

I had taken leave of my senses. Down deep in our hearts you know that wealth and power really have nothing to do with greatness.

One of the people that represent greatness to me is not some industrialist planning to make a few million more dollars. It is not some dictator controlling people's lives with the sound of his voice and the crack of a whip.

It is instead a simple woman name Mother Teresa, who was affectionately known as "angel of the slums." She was literally giving her life to share the suffering and lift the life of the poor people of India. She is the one who received the Nobel Peace Prize and the admiration of the world.

In this regard, we are more similar to Jesus than we think. We, too, realize that true greatness must be defined in terms of service. The only difference is that he practiced it in his own life. Our tendency is to applaud it in others while we spend our days chasing wealth and power.

Consider another area where he is one of us, and that is his message concerning God the Father.

It isn't easy to believe in a good God in a world like this. There are so many things that seem to contradict it. But when Jesus pictures God in terms of a loving Father, something deep inside of us responds to that. He told a story about a boy who ran away from home and made a mess of his life; but then he returned and found

forgiveness and cleansing and acceptance. That story is known and loved around the world. Somehow, we know that behind this sometimes cruel world, there must be a God like that.

We may walk away from him and crowd him out of our lives, but still he is there. And when he knocks on our door and we open for even a moment, he is no stranger. We know him, and he calls us by name. In our deepest understanding of God, we are one with Jesus. He is part of us, and we are part of him.

Finally, consider how he relates to us not only as individuals but also to the whole family of men and nations.

Some skeptics may be willing to accept that his thoughts find space and his message has meaning for people one at a time, or even in small groups. It may be well and good to apply his principles to our personal lives and in our homes and with our friends. There we can find a kinship. He can truly be one of us. But we move into the world at large with its warring purposes and its conflicting needs, there Jesus does not belong. His ideas are alien; his principles will not work and do not apply. Many, perhaps most, would insist that his message of love has no place in the council of nations and the total affairs of the human race at large. But is that so? Is that really so?

Our old world is in an awful mess, no question about that. But does that mess bear witness to the uselessness of the way and

wisdom of Jesus? To the contrary, when we look out on our world with its hurt, heartache, hatred, and hunger, what we are seeing is the uselessness of greed and power.

For centuries we have wanted to solve our problems with war, and all we have done is compound them. We have tried the way of isolation and every nation looking out for only its own interests, and see what we have got. We spend our money for weapons, while millions of people starve. And back behind it all we can hear Jesus talking about the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of men. We have never had the intelligence nor found the courage to take that seriously. His ways have not failed; ours have.

Jesus was no local idealist. He belongs to the age and to the entire human race. If ever we find our way out of this mess we are in, it can only be by the pathway of love and goodwill. His message is the toughest, most hardheaded truth this world will ever face, and we had better have the courage to face it. Our only hope is our kinship with him. Some may see him as a stranger; but in reality, he is one of us. **Amen.**