

WHAT IS ACTUALLY HAPPENING?

Isaiah 42. 1-9

Acts 10. 34-43

Matthew 3. 13-17

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Poor John the Baptist. It didn't look right. What's going on here? The account of our Lord's baptism in chapter 3 of St Matthew's gospel is *not* the public appearance of Jesus that John had set everyone up to see. In the verses that appear immediately before today's text, John had proclaimed that someone 'more powerful' was coming, someone whose sandals John was not even worthy enough to carry; someone who would 'baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire'. And as Matthew's third chapter ends, you can almost picture John the Baptist carrying on with the rest of that day's baptisms with a blank, vacant look on his face. He said all the familiar liturgical words and kept immersing people in the river Jordan, but his mind was not on his work. Why would Christ have let himself be so anonymous? Why did he let himself look like any other mere mortal (and a sinful mortal at that)? Where was the fire, the axe, the razzle-dazzle John had been hopping up and down screaming about for so long now?

It no doubt boggled John's mind because it all tied in with the mind-boggling mystery of the incarnation. Our Lord took the form of a mere mortal. *He really was human.* He could blend in with the crowd, and he did. Yes, we readers of Matthew's gospel have the privilege of knowing that Jesus is also God's beloved Son; but he's human, too: in fact, so human that he shares our lot in a sinful world. Christ himself was not sinful, but he was squarely identified with a sinful race and so, on our behalf, he

let himself get treated as though he were a sinner.¹ It would not be the last time he was treated that way, of course. But that's why he became human. And it is that very humanness which sets up the opening of the next chapter of Matthew's gospel, chapter four.

After all, prior to Matthew 4 had you ever before heard of the devil tempting God? Of course not.² When God is shining in all his mighty splendour, the devil cannot even get close to God. And even if the devil could get close, he could never tempt God. There would be no sense in trying, since there would be no chance of success. Trying to tempt God to sin would be like thinking you could actually pull a mountain behind you by tying a rope to a tree on the mountainside, and giving the whole thing a good tug. Only a fool would think you could move a mountain by pulling on it, and so also with God and temptation: the devil would never be able to do it. You're just not going to move God.

Until Matthew 4. What has happened suddenly to make the devil decide to try to pull the mountain along after all? Well, the Son of God has become human. Suddenly, in our Lord, the 'mountain' of God has been reduced to a significantly more manageable lump of clay. Maybe this one would yield to some serious tugging and pulling. It didn't work, of course. In the end Jesus proved that he was human enough to be tempted, but God enough not to succumb. At the Jordan River, Christ likewise proved that he was God enough to understand why John was protesting, but human enough humbly to let it happen anyway. In both cases our Lord cast his lot with us. Jesus looked into the waters of death which baptism represents,³ and he looked into the wilderness of sin and evil which we all face. He looked into both

¹ In saying, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness' our Lord uses the word 'righteousness' to indicate doing the revealed will of God; and in saying 'fulfil all righteousness', Jesus indicates that it is necessary for both him and John to do God's will, which includes the baptism of Christ. The plural 'us' links John and our Lord together as partners in carrying out God's saving plan (cf. Mt 11. 2-19).

² Even the odd scene that opens Job 1 is not tantamount to temptation.

³ Cf. Rom 6. 3-4.

places of death and sin and evil and said to us, his very human brothers and sisters, ‘Wait here: I’ll go first.’

We, like John, would maybe prefer a Christ who looks less humble and more proudly powerful; less vulnerable and more self-assuredly victorious. John the Baptist wanted our Lord to take over the preaching that day, to fill the air with words even more fiery and images even more arresting than John’s own sermons had contained. But Jesus declined. Instead he wordlessly waited in the baptism queue, wordlessly shuffled into the baptismal waters, and then wordlessly wandered off into the sunset to face God-knows-what in the wilds of the wilderness. Christ held back. He was silent. He was humble. He was vulnerable.

Yet somehow it is maybe our Lord’s silence that saves. Before the gospel of Matthew is finished, Jesus will quite famously stand in silence before the likes of Pontius Pilate.⁴ Christ consistently seems to know more than he’s willing to tell; and yet it is precisely this holding back, this willingness to say little or nothing, that manages to make everything work out in the end. Sometimes it’s the silence that saves; or at least, there is more going on in the relative silence of things than we know. It’s not empty silence, but pregnant silence.

It is fully possible, based on Matthew’s account at least, that our Lord’s baptism was one of dozens that day at the Jordan River. It’s fully possible that few, if any noticed anything unusual about that particular baptism. By the way, Matthew’s account makes it clear that Jesus was the only one to see the dove come down upon him and hear the voice from heaven declaring his beloved. The other gospel accounts of Jesus’s baptism⁵ indicate that John the Baptist also saw the dove; but none of the accounts indicate that anyone else saw or heard anything.

⁴ Cf. Mt 27. 11-14.

⁵ For example Jn 1. 29-34.

Think, if you will, of the many baptisms that you have witnessed. The parents bring the baby to the font; or on rarer occasions, an adult approaches. Many of the people who are present don't expect anything unusual to happen; and they would probably tell us that nothing does happen; that is, nothing beyond what they expected.

Yet in the silence of the Sacrament of Baptism and even in its ordinary exercise, the triune fullness of God is present. The heavens are opened again, so that we can get at God and God can get at us. The Holy Spirit of peace and wholeness descends to make a little one (or an adult) holy. And again, whether we hear it or not, God the Father's voice issues the decree of adoption of the baptised person into the divine family. At church baptisms, we don't typically see much razzle-dazzle or glitz and power as the world reckons things. Stones don't turn to bread;⁶ nor do angels flutter above our heads.⁷ But that hardly means that nothing is going on!

Amen.

⁶ Cf. Mt 4. 3.

⁷ Cf. Mt 4. 6.