

Epiphany 1 (Bapt of Christ) '11
Twente/Arnhem

Isaiah 42:1-9
Acts 10:34-43
Matthew 3:13-17

Christ's Commissioning, Our Calling

When I was ordained to the priesthood, awhile ago now, Bishop David Hamid, the Suffragan Bishop in our Diocese, gave a remarkable sermon. He invited everyone present into a little thought experiment.

He said, 'I want you all to try to enter, prayerfully, in your minds, in some small way, into what Sam must be thinking and feeling right now.' 'First of all, think in your mind, as vividly as you can, what it means to be called by God. The meaning of vocation. Feeling called by God to serve Him. Next, I want you to imagine setting out on a lifetime of faithful obedience to God. Imagine coming to a point where there would be no excuses about being in Church every Sunday, whether you like it or not. No choice. And when you come to church, imagine having to speak the words of the liturgy with sincerity and conviction, and doing so, week after week, month after month, and year after year, for the rest of your life. Then I want you to imagine week after week, after the Sunday liturgies, greeting as many of the people as you can, extending a word of warmth and affection, and listening to all the little details of their joys and sorrows. And as you listen to them, imagine that you hear that one of the number is sick and you rush to the hospital, and you find yourself standing by their bedside, sharing their fear, speaking a word of hope and comfort about the presence of God. Now, imagine yourself making it your business to get to know as much as possible about the challenges facing the world in this present age – about the ills of our society, about the injustices around us, and making it also your business to actually try to do something about these ills, and working actively, speaking out, to address in justice, and to be ready to stand beside the poor and marginalised. Then, if that is not enough, imagine embracing a life in which you must be constantly loving, always filled with understanding, always ready to forgive. This life must be exemplary – lying, theft, violence, materialism, sexual immorality are clearly out of the question

for you. And imagine a life of daily prayer, of regular and careful study of the Bible, so that your life will be guided by the word of God, and that the wisdom of Christ begins to live in you, as people will count on you for the knowledge and spiritual truth which comes from God. And imagine being known and recognized on the street, wherever you go, as one whose life is devoted to God. Being recognised as someone who stands for values which are distinct from the worlds, as someone who will never be afraid to encourage others to come to the Church and to always be ready to invite others to seek a life of faith and commitment. And finally, imagine all of this that I have mentioned, being commissioned and acknowledged and inaugurated at a solemn church gathering, where everyone present prays for you, that the Holy Spirit of God will fill you and enable you and strengthen you and never leave you!'

'So, how do you feel?' (I know at that moment I was shifting in my own seat under the incredible weight I was feeling.)

And then Bishop David smiled and said, 'Well, surprise, surprise, I am not talking about ordination at all! All these things I have mentioned are about the meaning of our baptism – about the life and obligation of every single Christian on the planet! Now, how do you all feel?' You could have heard a pin drop!

I, for one, felt relief, at that great weight being lifted from just my shoulders and distributed around the church.

For Bishop David had affirmed what we know to be true: that the Christian life is not a spectator sport, but an every member ministry, a universal calling for all who are baptized in Christ into the power of the Spirit.

None of us is perfect, not least church leaders, and that is not the point of course. The point is that in baptism each of us is called to die to the old life of sin, and to accept the new life in Christ. Everyone of us becomes part of the body of Christ and each of us is an essential part of it.

As St Theresa of Avila over-stated it:

Christ has no body but yours,/ No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks / Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, / Yours are the
hands, with which he blesses all the world. / Yours are the hands, yours
are the feet, / Yours are the eyes, you are his body.

Christ has no body now but yours,/No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks/ compassion on this world.

Christ has no body now on earth but yours.

We are baptized into Christ's body, so his commissioning becomes our
calling, too.

Today we remember Jesus' own baptism. His baptism had this huge
difference from each of ours: he did not need to be baptized with John's
baptism as we do. John the Baptist's baptism was focused primarily on
cleansing people from sin and calling them to repentance. The Jews
practised ritual cleansing, but the major innovation in John's baptism
was it was proclaimed to be sufficient, once and for all.

Jesus did not need to be cleansed or to repent, because we believe he
was without sin. So why did he choose to be baptized by John? Even
John is a bit embarrassed by this, and he responds, 'I need to be
baptized by you, and do you come to me?'

But Jesus insists, saying, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil
all righteousness.' There are two key words here, one obvious, one less so.
'Righteousness' δικαιοσύνην, as used by Matthew, is about the accomplishing of
God's will in all its fullness. Jesus is bringing in a new Kingdom of justice and
righteousness. ⁴'Here is my servant, whom I uphold,' said the Lord through the
Prophet Isaiah, 'my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon
him; he will bring forth justice to the nations... ³A bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. ⁴
He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching... ⁶I am the Lord, I have called you in

righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a
covenant to the people, a light to the nations, ⁷ to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in
darkness.' Jesus sees John's baptism as preparation for his Kingdom.

The second key word in what Jesus says to join is obvious already. It is
the little two letter word 'us'. He says to John, 'Let it be so now; for it is
proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' You and me John.
The rest of us, too. Baptism in Christ means aiming to be free from sin,
so that we may better know and feel God's grace and welcome His Spirit
to guide and strengthen us be parts of his body, to serve Him and His
Kingdom as co-workers in Christ. His commission is our calling. Amen.