

BAPTISM OF THE LORD (Christmas Sermon #5)

“I, the Lord, have called you for the victory of Justice”
(Isaiah 42, 6)

Those of us who have been involved at least a little in combat sports know that there is stress and pain involved even in a controlled fight. There is also a certain exhilaration. This is impossible to explain to those who have never felt it, but it is a real thing. The cliché phrase, I suppose, is that you feel very alive, but that really doesn't capture the feel of that particular exhilaration. This combination of stress and exhilaration is, I think, what St. Paul had in mind when, writing to St. Timothy, he described Christian life as “fighting the good fight”. There is stress to it, and even danger; but there is also exhilaration, and the deep satisfaction of knowing that one truly is fighting for something really worthwhile, Justice in the deepest sense of the word. Beyond the political cant in which the sublime word “Justice” is too often invoked, there lies the reality of that holy Righteousness in which Justice is inseparable from the depths of Divine Mercy and Charity. That Righteousness is truly exhilarating, and for its sake it is well worthwhile to endure some stress.

The Church on Earth has traditionally been called “The Church Militant”, because she has a fight on her hands. This fight is always two fold, a struggle within to remain faithful to divine Righteousness, and a struggle without against those who would, if they could, extinguish the light of divine Righteousness. Do you recall the Lord Jesus saying that He came to bring not peace, but the sword? If you want peace and quiet, Christianity is not truly for you. But do you really want only peace and quiet? Don't you really want a life of meaning and purpose? If you want to live always “with an abundance of caution”, praying in front of the Crucified Lord is not for you. If, on the other hand, you want to live with courage and honor, nothing is better for you than to pray in front of the Crucified Lord.

Well, that doesn't sound much like Christmas!

On the contrary, there is nothing more truly like Christmas. The Boy born at Christmas was born to fight. The Man baptized in the Jordan was anointed with the Holy Spirit to be a warrior. From the His manger on He flung a challenge in the face of hell and all who, like wicked King Herod, who put themselves under hell's influence. His way of fighting, as the Cross indicates, is exceptional; but fight He did. Reading the holy Gospels, one does not discover a Man Who is peace loving in the usual sense of the word. Peace loving usually means someone who avoids conflict. People who avoid conflict simply don't end up getting crucified. It is better to say that He avoided unnecessary conflict. When faithfulness to Truth and Justice demanded it, however, He took His stand fearlessly, come what may. As His disciples, we also are to avoid unnecessary conflict; but, when faithfulness to Truth and Justice demand it, we are to take our stand fearlessly, come what may. We are Christians in order to fight for the victory of Justice.

I have no intention of getting into the ethics of physical fighting, an important question, but not my concern today. My point now is that we are to be willing to uphold, against all comers, the essential truths of the Christian Faith. Those essential truths can be enumerated in different ways, but I suggest that they come down to three things.

1. Human beings are meant for Heaven, and Heaven is joined to Earth through Jesus Christ, and through the Word and Sacraments that He entrusted to His Church.
2. Everything truly human is meant for Heaven. As human beings are redeemed and sanctified, nothing truly human is lost. All is corrected, and all is perfected.
3. Between human beings and their heavenly destiny there stands an enemy; and between the Lord's disciples and this enemy there is a fight to the finish

Human beings are destined for Heaven. There is a Promised Land waiting for us. There is a Resurrection of the Dead. In the Lord's Word we are told of that Land of Hope and of that glorious Resurrection. In the Lord's Sacraments we receive a foretaste of that Land of Hope and of that glorious Resurrection. Whenever people hear the Church, they must hear that message. Our hope is not limited to this life only. We are headed for Heaven, and we expect the Resurrection of the Dead.

In that Homeland and Resurrection, all truly human things are corrected and perfected, not lost. Every human mood is embraced. Every human personality is embraced. Every human activity is embraced. The only thing that is not embraced is that combination of ultimate hopelessness and present selfishness that is the essence of evil. When human life is purged of hopelessness and selfishness, then our creative dimension, our sexual dimension, our fighting dimension, and our thinking dimension, will all work together for the greater glory of God and the happiness of mankind.

For that correction and perfection to occur, we have to fight. There is an enemy, who labors constantly to poison all our creativity, sexuality, strenuousness, and thinking, with hopelessness and selfishness. As the Disciples of the Lord, we are locked in a fight with that enemy. For the sake of that fight, we are to embrace and use every truth, wherever we find it. For the sake of that fight, we are to reject every lie, whoever speaks it. Every human being belongs in this fight. Every art and talent is to be used for this fight. The only way to peace on earth is through this fight.

All three of these points are found in the Christmas story. The Shepherds declare that our salvation is something truly earthy and gritty. This body is not to be despised. This body is part of who we are now (one peculiar post modern error is forgetting that it is partly from our bodies that we learn who we are); and in the wonder of the Resurrection it will be part of who we are forever. The Magi declare that this mind of ours is not to be despised either. This mind makes us partakers of God's own wisdom and creativity. The mind, too, is part of who we are now; perfected in Heaven's glory, the mind will spend eternity delving into the inexhaustible mysteries and beauties of divine life. The murderous King Herod declares, however, that we aren't going to get to Heaven without a fight.

In presenting these three truths, Christmas sums up why Christianity is unique. Quite simply, Christianity has it all. There are other human creeds and philosophies that explore the human need for mysticism. There are other human creeds and philosophies that give expression to the human need for a fight. There are other human creeds and philosophies that develop the human need for rationality and order. Christianity has all of these. Christianity is mystical and militant, spiritual and physical, rational and miraculous all at once. To me, the image of the Baby of Bethlehem seems to encapsulate all of this. It touches the heart, and energizes the intellect simultaneously. We look at the hero's birth - but not the usual kind of hero. There will be conflict in His life, but no chest pounding or boasting. He will serve, and not be served. He will conquer by seeming to lose everything, and triumph by a Cross. Isn't that surprising? Yet it is a very satisfying surprise. We are shocked for a moment, but then find ourselves thinking "Of course! From the Wood of the Manger to the Wood of the Cross - it makes sense! How else could it be?" There is something deep within humanity, long hidden and almost forgotten, that always hoped that our God would appear on earth and walk among us, share life with us, and show us what it means to be fully human.

The Lord Jesus Christ is True God and True Man. That dogmatic formula enshrines the precious truth that God became Human to show Human beings what it is to be fully human. Being fully human is not expressed by glib platitudes or by rigid moralisms. It can only be expressed by a life - by THIS life: a life gritty, earthy and physical; a life thoughtful, intelligent and spiritual; a life of struggle, of death, and of victory.

Now the Christmas Season ends. The Magi return to their distant land. The Shepherds have returned to their daily labors. After a burst of violence, the struggle has died down for about three decades, until This Man's baptism unleashes again the struggle between Him and the enemy. In this pause we celebrate, with deep gratitude, the truth that Our God has appeared on earth and has walked among us, has shared life and death with us, has fought and bled for us, and shows us, now and forever, what it is to be truly, fully, blessedly human.