

A WATERY SIGN OF GOD'S LOVE

Baptism of Our Lord – Cycle B: Matthew 2:1-12; Mark 1:4-11

It was John Alexander, age four at the time, who first connected for me God's love and the church's sacraments. It was a time in the history of our synod when parishes were changing one at a time from making children wait until they were confirmed before receiving the Sacrament of Holy Communion to what is now practised throughout our synod as the Communion of the Baptized. For as long as he could remember, John had been welcome at the Table of his church on Sunday. The Sunday he and his parents visited the church in which I was a member, he had to stay in his pew while his parents went forward and communed at the altar rail. When they returned to their seats, John was inconsolable, his eyes red and tears streaming down his cheeks. "Why," he blubbered to his parents, "won't this church let God love me?"

Ever since that very difficult day when the prophetic word of God passed through the lips of a four-year-old, I have taught that the holy sacraments are all about love – God's love given, shared with, poured over and poured out for those who are, by definition, the beloved. We are God's beloved, the sacraments proclaim. John Alexander was right to be upset. And it may be that the church has lost its way more than once in recognizing the pre-eminence of God's love in all that it says and does; that we are often so methodical and so careful with the mysteries of faith that we miss something as fundamental as the sacraments being means of grace because they proclaim God's great love for people.

This week I had the privilege of listening to an Epiphany service from Eton College, Windsor through a podcast on my computer. The service used the three stanzas of T. S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*, the Epiphany Gospel Paul proclaimed for us at the beginning of worship this morning, a few anthems, and a number of Epiphany carols in order to mark and celebrate this pivotal story in the Christmas cycle of readings. Matthew tells his readers that the wise men came to visit Jesus and his parents because they saw signs in the stars of a watershed event in the history of the world. It is the culmination of Matthew's rather brief birth narrative, but it is also the first epiphany we catalogue in a whole season of epiphanies revealing Jesus as the One in whom and through whom God would seek and save the human family.

The presider for the service was Canon Jeremy Davies, canon-precentor of Salisbury Cathedral for the past 26 years. He will, in fact, retire from his post next Sunday, January 15, at the Epiphany Procession. The service I heard this week from Eton was remarkable in every way; certainly a fitting farewell for someone who has been described as one of the most creative minds in the Church of England. As I listened to the service, I marvelled at how gently he guided the congregation toward the pre-eminence of love in our relationship with God; that the Epiphany is about love, especially through the interpretive genius of the 20th-century poet, T. S. Eliot. At the end of Eliot's second stanza, the wise men arrive at their destination, which is no more and no less than Jesus' birth. As Jeremy Davies notes, in Eliot's poem there is no star, no baby, no Mary and Joseph, no shepherds or angels. But we soon realize that for Eliot, the birth, their destination, is shadowed with the imagery of Jesus' death – three trees on the low sky and six hands at the open door of a tavern dicing for pieces of silver. The wise men in Eliot's poem describe their destination, Jesus' birth, as "satisfactory," and Canon Davies recognizes Eliot's intent to refer to a traditional doctrinal statement of the church in which it is Jesus' *death* that is described as making "satisfaction" for our sins. Jeremy Davies cannot let this reference pass without comment. He says,

[Eliot's] throw-away phrase "it was satisfactory" bears a good deal more weight than is at first apparent. For it is that phrase that carries us, theologically speaking, into the heart of the Christian doctrine of redemption. This is the idea that the death of Jesus alone could atone for the sins of the world by making satisfaction; and in making satisfaction, bridging the seemingly unbridgeable gap that separates sinful human beings from the God who created them. Of course that very word "satisfaction"... is not without its problems for believers. For it suggests the offering of an innocent victim in place of the guilty party to appease an angry God demanding justice.

Actually, despite the fact that that view is drawn from biblical imagery and is replicated in countless Christian hymns, it is by no means a complete view of the God revealed in and through Jesus. If there is satisfaction, it is that God himself in Jesus, his Son, pours

himself out – empties himself, is how St. Paul expresses it – in order that *his love* might outweigh human greed, lust, and selfishness, what scripture and the Christian tradition refer to as sin. In the death of Jesus, God himself is making up the moral deficit, putting into the balance more than enough love, grace, mercy and forgiveness to outweigh human waywardness. *That* is how God makes satisfaction for the sins of the whole world, by out-facing human sin with divine love, even though the cost to God is enormous. It is that insight into the all-loving nature of God himself that T. S. Eliot recognizes when he uses that throw-away phrase, “It was (you may say) satisfactory.”

Today, we move on to the Baptism of Jesus, the second epiphany in the Christmas Cycle, and again, it is the pre-eminence of love that can so easily escape our notice. Fortunately, Fred Pratt Green, another wonderful Christian poet of the 20th century, did notice, we discover in the text of our Hymn of the Day, *When Jesus Came to Jordan*. A distinction always has to be made when the church tries to compare Jesus’ baptism and our own. There are similarities and there are differences, we say. Jesus received the Holy Spirit and we identify the gift of the Holy Spirit as the unique gift of Christian baptism. We are named God’s beloved in baptism, just as Jesus was called God’s beloved in the voice from heaven. Jesus’ baptism included, we assume, his commissioning by God to proclaim the good news: his ministry dates from his baptism. We, too, believe that we are called into discipleship and service through our baptism into Christ. But the point of departure concerns the freedom from the power of sin and death that we recognize as the gift of our baptism. We understand Jesus as without sin: Jesus repented by undergoing John’s baptism without the need to repent!

Interestingly, Fred Pratt Green observes that a kind of reverse Baptism occurs for Jesus in the waters of the Jordan. He writes that Jesus did not come for pardon, but rather to be in solidarity with “all who mourn their sins.” In fact, it is Jesus’ solidarity with sinful humanity that Fred latches onto as the accidental meaning of Jesus’ baptism by John. And it is in this accidental meaning that we see again the pre-eminence of love. In the waters of baptism, we teach, we meet Jesus and are joined to his death and resurrection. It is another kind of communion. It is a watery sign, in this case, of God’s love – so comprehensive, so long-lasting that we can live our whole life of discipleship in its power. We are baptized only once.

It is the season of epiphanies. The substitutionary doctrine of atonement, Jeremy Davies observes, is trumped by God’s love for us in Jesus Christ. The sacraments, John Alexander showed me, are all about love. Fred Pratt Green teaches that Jesus’ baptism is, in one rather significant way, the reverse of our baptism; and in that reversal the water in our font takes on a new dimension. As we join the Magi in this season of Epiphany, may the pre-eminence of God’s love be our wisdom and the guiding star that leads us.