

## *A Son of the Commandments*

January 07, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

As we begin the Season of Epiphany, we look at how the glory of Christ is manifested or made known to the world. We commemorate three specific occasions of the Epiphany, beginning last night, with the visit of the Magi who brought their gifts and worshiped the Christ Child (Mt. 2:1-12). Their homage represented the adoration of all nations that Jesus was to be the source of salvation and blessing for the whole world. The other two occasions are the Baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, which we celebrate today, and the wedding feast at Cana, which we will recall next week.

Today we encounter a grown-up Jesus, ready to take on a new direction in an act of adult choice. Jesus had experienced the nurturing and preparation for adult life pretty much as we all do. He went to school, he learned of family traditions, he went to the synagogue, he studied the Law and the Prophets, he became *bar-misvah*, a *son of the Commandments*. By this adult

## *A Son of the Commandments*

January 07, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

choice, he announces his presence, affirms his belief and faces the beginning of his life work, a radical ministry yet unfolding.

As we heard in the Gospel for this day, the people are questioning in their hearts about whether John is himself the Christ. John answers, *I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire* (Lk. 3:16).

So, while all the people are being baptized, Jesus also takes on the fulfillment of this rite quite naturally. He has come to the River Jordan, the only major river that runs through the Palestinian landscape. There he has found John thundering repentance and drowning sin in these willing participants.

## *A Son of the Commandments*

January 07, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

In my homily last week, I quoted a portion of the Introduction to Dorothy Sayers' epic play-cycle, *The Man Born to Be King*. It originally consisted of twelve plays written for broadcast on BBC radio in 1943. Her treatment of the events I just described is fascinating, to me, at least. Permit me to share with you a small segment of the dialogue she created (reprint, Ignatius Press, 1990, pp 67-70):

John the Baptist says: *Men and women of Israel! Once more I call you to repent. Have you come prepared to do this? Are you here because you're sorry for your sins? Or, only out of curiosity? I wonder. Some of you I see are Pharisees. Religious men, keepers of the Law, patterns of respectable piety. What are you doing here? Who warned you to flee from the vengeance to come?*

Then some Levites get into it: *Who do you think you are, the Messiah?* John replies: *I am not the*

## *A Son of the Commandments*

January 07, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

*Messiah. I am sent to proclaim his coming.* A 2<sup>nd</sup> Levite asks: *Are you Elijah come again?* John says, *No, I am not.* A 3<sup>rd</sup> Levite asks: *Or the Prophet foretold in the Scriptures?* John said: *No. I'm nobody, only a voice crying in the desert. I am the herald of God's Kingdom. I baptize, but only with the water of repentance. There is a far greater man coming soon. He will baptize you with spirit and with fire.*

Then a Mother speaks: *what a strange man he is.* A Father speaks: *He's a good preacher. I don't know that I like him speaking that way to those worthy Pharisees.* The baptisms continue. The Mother again: *Dear me! That's an interesting young man.* Hannah (a woman in her forties) speaks: *Which?* The Mother: *Just taking off his coat. Look, next to the woman in blue.* Hannah: *Where? I can't see...Oh!....with the short gold beard, do you mean?* The Mother: *Yes, and the remarkable eyes.*

## *A Son of the Commandments*

January 07, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

Hannah: *Well, I do believe.....yes, it must be.....it's John's cousin I was telling you about.* The Father speaks: *the carpenter's son?* Hannah: *Yes, Jesus bar-Joseph. Well now, isn't that strange? I must try and catch him when all this is over.* Father speaks: *I think he's the last of the candidates.*

John says: *What is your...You, here, Jesus? You come to me for baptism? But that's the wrong way about. It is I that should come to you.*

Jesus speaks: *Do as I ask you, now, John. It's right to begin this way, like everybody else.* John: *If you say so, Cousin.* The crowd shouts: *Blessed be God for Jesus!* John says: *I baptize you, Jesus, with the baptism of water unto the Kingdom.*

And there was thunder in the Heavens.

## *A Son of the Commandments*

January 07, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

However life-changing John's rite of washing and repentance was, it remained a purification through water. As such, John's ethical rite of cleansing could not compare with the baptismal powers of the One to come, who would baptize with *the Holy Spirit and with fire* (v. 16b). Luke's emphasis is not the baptism itself so much as *what happened afterward*. In a detail unique to Luke, we learn that Jesus prayed. Prayer as a way of life is a primary emphasis in Luke's portrayal of Jesus. His ministry begins and ends with prayer, and throughout the Gospel, Jesus is often seen at prayer, especially at transitional times in his ministry (5:16; 9:28-29; 22:32; 22:39-46). Throughout his life, Jesus provides a model of prayer.

As he prays, we see three manifestations of Divine action. First, the heavens open as an indication of the Divine revelation that is to follow. Then the Holy Spirit descends upon him *in bodily form like a dove* (v. 22a). Finally, there is the voice from heaven, which

*A Son of the Commandments*

January 07, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

declares: *You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased* v. 22b).

By these words we are reminded once again of the sovereignty of Jesus: He truly *is* the Chosen One of whom the Baptist spoke.

AMEN.