

### ***The Only Son from Heaven***

In the name of him who baptized us with the Holy Spirit and with fire, dear friends in Christ: It's a rather frightful portrait of Jesus' soon-to-be-inaugurated ministry that John the Baptizer paints in this morning's Gospel reading. He describes Jesus as coming with a winnowing fork in his hand – a tool used to toss the threshed and flailed kernels of grain into the air to separate the good wheat from the useless chaff. It's a picture of the coming judgment and how the Lord will separate the saints from the sinners on the Last Day. At that time he will divide the faithful saved from the unbelieving damned; taking the former to be with him forever in Paradise and casting the latter into the flames of hell. Certainly, that's *part* of what's pictured. But in another sense, his coming with a winnowing fork is a picture of *cleansing*; that is how the Lord Jesus will separate sinners from their sins and thus make them saints by breaking through and casting away the hard husk of sin that covers each one of us, and then drawing out the new person that he creates in us by the power of his Word and the breath of his Spirit. So, John's prophetic description does double duty: both Christ's work of judgment and his cleansing of sinners are contained in this single image of his coming to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Interestingly enough, there is a sense in which we as followers of the Lord Jesus are called to get involved in this business of separating wheat from chaff, and that's in the field of truth and ideas. I mean there is God's truth on one side, and Satan's lies on the other. We know that. And we know that the two are poles apart. The difference is literally light and dark – *or life and death*. But in between there are a lot of statements and thoughts and ideas that contain elements of both. And when we are confronted by them, we are called to be discerning: to divide out and keep what's good and true, and to exclude and throw away what's bad and useless. In this sense it is incumbent on all of us to be constantly separating wheat from chaff; though I need to add that saying so in our pluralistic culture is not at all popular. No, today we are told that all ideas – especially ideas that pertain to God and religion and morality – are equally valid: "Who's to say what's right and what's wrong about such things? After all, aren't we all just guessing? Who really knows what is wheat and what is chaff? Besides, isn't sincerity all that really matters? Does it make any difference what someone believes about God and all that other stuff so long as he or she is truly following their heart and whatever it is they believe helps them to live a better life?" We hear questions like that all the time. And to them we respond, "Yes, it makes a huge difference what someone believes; both in here time and most especially in eternity."

With the Scriptures we maintain that Christ and faith in him alone is the only legitimate path to God and to eternal life, and that all other expressions of religion and spirituality are but pious illusions that lead to damnation. There is a lot about our faith that people are opposed to; but it's this claim of *exclusivity* that they find most offensive. This was brought into clear focus again just recently. In the week before Christmas there was a Barbara Walters special on TV that went two evenings in a row (maybe some of you saw it). She was asking the questions, "Is there a heaven? And if so, how do you get there?" These are the big questions that every person must deal with and that every religion attempts to answer. And so what Walters did was to go around and ask rabbis, priests, and pastors of various religions what they thought about it. She even spoke to the Dalai Lama who is Buddhist and to a would-be Muslim suicide bomber who failed in his attempt to get his seventy-two virgins as a reward for blowing himself up along with a lot of innocent civilians, and who is now rotting in an Israeli jail.

Now, I didn't see the broadcast (it was brought to my attention by a sharp-eyed member); but I have since read the transcripts and gone over many follow-up interviews and what not, so I do know something about it. Anyway, it happens that Walters has no religious affiliation whatsoever. She wasn't raised in any faith and doesn't see any need for it in her own life. In her mind, that makes her reporting about what others believe completely objective; but I'm sure you see her mistake. She's not truly neutral on the questions she was asking like she imagines. Instead by seeing no need for any of it, she started with the assumption that none of the answers she got could possibly matter. They would all be equally

unimportant. Not surprisingly, that's where her report ended up. "Is there a heaven? Maybe, but who knows? How do you get there if there is one? No one can say for sure; but there are lots of good options. The only real villains are people who insist that they know and who say that their way is the only way."

So I guess we're villains for believing what we do. But it may be of some comfort to us that this conflict between those who believe God's Word and those who want to believe that there are many paths up the mountain to God (if indeed there is either a God or a mountain) is nothing new. It's been that way ever since the fall into sin. Already in the early chapters of Genesis, we see the conflict coming to one of its many heads in the historical account of Noah. You know the story: how it happened that everyone was doing pretty much as they pleased, believing what they wanted to believe, and living according to the dictates of their own hearts; and how the Lord God was so appalled at the behavior of humankind and their rejection of his truth that he determined to withdraw his Holy Spirit from them and wipe them all out.

... All except for Noah and his immediate family. Noah received God's grace and believed him when he said there was a flood coming. Accordingly, he acted in faith and built the ark as he had been directed. In it, he and his family were safe from the destruction that enveloped the whole earth. And I want you to know that there were many other people in the world at that time who were very sincere about their own beliefs and ideas – and every one of them drowned. Only the small handful who trusted in God's exclusive plan of salvation exactly the way he revealed it lived.

You may remember that toward the end of his ordeal, Noah released a dove to act as his scout. It flew around looking for a place to land, but there was nowhere for it to set its foot. Outside the ark there was only death and destruction over the whole earth. The only safe place in the world, the only place there was life, was on the ark. It was the sole conveyer of salvation from the flood.

Sometime later, Noah released the dove again. This time it returned to him with a green sprig plucked from an olive seedling. It was a sure sign that life was returning to the earth—but more than that, in the ancient world extending an olive branch was a sign of peace and friendship. Approaching your enemy with an olive branch meant that the conflict had ended; the war was over. By having the dove bring back the end of an olive branch, God was saying to Noah, "It's over. My anger has been placated and my judgment against man's sin has been satisfied." And the Lord put a rainbow in the sky as a sign of his covenant of love, with a promise never again to use water to destroy the whole earth.

A few weeks later Noah released the dove a third time and it flew away and never returned to him. And that's something to bear in mind as today we see in the Gospel reading a dove coming from heaven and lighting on Jesus. This dove, we know, was a visible manifestation of God's Holy Spirit—the same Spirit that God had withdrawn from the earth in the days of Noah. And here we have Jesus, standing out in the water like ... well, like the ark did. This is not a coincidence. There's a message here: it's that in this whole wide world awash in sin and death, where everyone is out doing exactly what they please and believing what they want to believe, the only place for God's Spirit to land is on Jesus. By virtue of his sinless perfection, only he is a fit vessel for the Spirit of God to dwell. Only in him is life and salvation.

This really is what Christian baptism is all about. The Scriptures say that we *are baptized into Christ*. What we are doing in baptism is getting aboard the Ark of our salvation. Like the ark that saved Noah, Christ Jesus is the one who will weather the storms and floods of God's wrath and judgment against sin, while we ride it out *in him* in safety. We can do this because, like Noah, we have received God's grace and his call to come into the Ark. That's what baptism is; so that now the water that was once used to destroy the old earth is used to drown the sinful old self in each of us so that a new life given by God can begin to grow within. This is the spiritual rebirth that makes each of us a child of God.

To confirm it, as Jesus is coming up out of the water we hear the voice of the Father announcing his covenant of love: "*You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.*" Obviously, these words of the Father are directed first to Jesus; but what I want you to see is that they are also directed to everyone who is "in him"; that is, those who are baptized into him. That's why Jesus was baptized. You recall that John called people to repentance and baptized them for the forgiveness of sin. Jesus didn't need to

repent. He had no sins to be forgiven. His Baptism wasn't for himself; it was for you—just as the sins he later died for were not his own, they were yours. So likewise, the words of the Father directed to him are for your benefit. First so that you will know that this is the Father's only Son from heaven—the one conveyor of salvation for humankind; and secondly, so that being in him, you too will hear your Father's approval. In your baptism, the Father says to you, *"You are my son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."*

The Father's declaration is prophetically expanded in today's Old Testament reading. Looking ahead seven centuries, he anticipates the Baptism of Jesus and puts in the mouth of Isaiah the prophet his commission to his Son. We're not given any room to come up with alternative methods for finding salvation when he emphatically states, *"Here is my servant, of whom I take hold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations."* Again, he impresses upon us the exclusivity of salvation through Jesus when he says, *"I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles."* A covenant is sort of like a contract between God and men. The old covenant was the law, and it applied to everyone. It said if you obeyed the law in every detail, you would be saved. That didn't do us much good, because no person ever held up his end of the bargain. In appointing his Son to be a covenant for the people, God is saying to him, *"You are the new contract that applies to everyone."*

And the wonderful thing about this contract is that it is completely one-sided. It doesn't depend on what we do; it depends on what the Son of God does for us. He is the one who is called in righteousness because he is the only one who *is* righteous, and he's given the task of bringing God's justice to the world. Not that he's going to destroy sinners as they richly deserve—that would be one way to bring justice—but rather, again like the ark of Noah, he'll do it by bearing sinners inside him, and taking the brunt of God's wrath against them on himself.

This is God's *only* plan to save us; but up to this point, I've been stressing the exclusivity of the Christian faith. We need to look at this a different way. It's true that there is no salvation outside of Christ; but what is really being stressed throughout the Scriptures is the absolute *in-clusivity* of salvation in Jesus. In the ark, only eight people were saved. With all the animals and all, there really wasn't room or provision for any more. But in Christ, the door is open to everyone. No one need be excluded.

In fact, when all is said and done, it is just about every other faith other than Christianity that's exclusive. The reason for this is that all of them ultimately depend on *what you do to achieve salvation* for yourself. Every approach to heaven that's based on human effort is naturally going to favor people who are more gifted, or sensitive, or "spiritual", or have more of whatever it takes to get there than those who don't. And even then, all such approaches to heaven leave a person in doubt. Because attaining the goal depends on what you do – and because you're fallen sinner who makes a lot of mistakes – you can never know if you've done enough. But no one is excluded from the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the complete assurance of salvation he brings. No one is left out because of age, race, gender, education, and above all not because of ability—because with respect to the things of God, our faith tells us that none of us has any ability.

This is emphasized in the passage from Isaiah that describes us as broken reeds and smoldering wicks: that is, pretty much useless. But it goes on to say that it is people like that whom Jesus has come to save. As weak and pathetic as we are, we won't be broken off or snuffed out by him. Later in the text, all people are further described as blind prisoners in a dark dungeon—completely lost and helpless, and under the power of the devil. It says he's come to give everyone sight and to set them free.

And because he is the only Son from heaven, only he can do it. How? First, by taking on our human flesh, becoming the child of Mary, and living a sinless life. Second, by coming to the Jordan River to be baptized for our sins, and then by going to the cross to die for them. And finally, by rising from the dead to declare what God has done for us, so that we can hear, and by the power of his Spirit believe in the salvation he has won for all.

And no, that's not considered a nice, culturally sensitive thing to believe by those who are, as yet, blind prisoners in the devil's dark dungeon. But they need not remain in that hopeless condition; and we

can be part of setting them free. Again, because we are in Christ, the words directed to him are also directed to us. Look again at the passage from Isaiah and understand that since you are in Christ, the Lord is speaking to you. God has chosen you to be his servant. He's placed his Spirit on you. He's promised to uphold you and keep you from discouragement. And in so doing, he's charged you convey his justice to people by telling them the good news of what Jesus has done for us all.

This is the main message of Epiphany: that God in his grace has sent only *one* Savior for *all* people – his only Son from Heaven; and he wants everyone to know it. May he give us the grace to believe it, and to be part of his plan to spread the good news. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***