

## A Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, January 14, 2007

*The Rev'd Stephen C. Scarlett*

“And it came to pass in those days, that Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee, and was baptized of John in Jordan. And straightway coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opened, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him: And there came a voice from heaven, *saying*, Thou art my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (from today’s gospel, Mark 1:1-11).

John the Baptist, the prophet of Advent, appears again on the Second Sunday after the Epiphany. The focus in Advent is on John’s ministry of preparation for the coming of Christ. The focus today is on John’s baptism of Jesus as a revelation of Jesus’ identity.

The baptism of Jesus reveals him to be the Messiah. We can only understand what this means by understanding the Old Testament background. The word Messiah means, “anointed one.” In the Old Testament, two types of people were understood to be messiahs or anointed ones: priests and kings.

The priests were anointed with oil in the ritual of ordination. In Exodus, God instructed Moses to consecrate Aaron and his sons as priest. Exodus 29:7 says, “You shall take the anointing oil, pour it on his head and anoint him.”

The kings of Israel were also anointed with oil. God revealed to Samuel that Saul was his chosen king. Samuel found Saul and, as 1 Samuel 10:1 says, “took a flask of oil and poured it on [Saul’s] head.” When God rejected Saul for his disobedience and chose David, Samuel went to David’s house, “took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers” (1 Samuel 16:13). David gave instructions about how to make Solomon king after him. He said, “Let Zadok the priest and Nathan the prophet anoint him king over Israel” (1 Kings 1:34).

The oil of anointing was understood to be an outward sign of the Holy Spirit, a symbol of God’s favor. A recognized prophet—Moses, Samuel, Nathan—was present to show, by the sign of oil, that this was the man upon whom God’s Spirit and God’s favor rested.

Against this background, we can see that the baptism of Jesus is the revelation that he is *The Anointed One*, *The Messiah*, the one towards whom all previous anointed ones pointed. John the Baptist is the recognized prophet. Instead of the anointing oil, which was understood to be a sign of the Spirit, the Holy Spirit himself descended in bodily form as a dove. The voice from heaven declared what the act of anointing implied. “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Here is God’s chosen king. Here is the priest anointed to offer the perfect sacrifice (cf. Psalm 2:6f).

The baptism of Jesus helps us to understand our own baptism. Jesus is the one who “baptizes with the Holy Spirit” (Mark 1:8). In baptism, the Spirit that descended upon Christ descends upon us and we are declared to be children of God. We become, as St. Paul says, “the elect of God, holy and beloved.” (Col. 3:12).

And we are made to share in the reign and priesthood of Christ. As Revelation says, Jesus “loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father” (1:5-6).

These are not strange new offices for us. They are part of the original vocation of mankind. We were

made to be priests, to offer the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God for all that he has given us, and receive back from God his blessing. Through sin, we lost our priestly vocation. We took the creation and said, “This is mine.” We became unthankful and greedy and we received a curse rather than a blessing.

We were made to rule as kings. As God said to man in Genesis, “have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (1:28). Through sin we lost our dominion. We became idolaters. The creation came to rule over us. We came to be controlled by our desire for things. We became slaves rather than kings.

All that we lost through sin has been restored to us in Christ. He offered his whole life to God in sacrifice to fulfill man’s vocation and reconcile us to God. And he came to subdue the world, the flesh and the devil. He came to rule over the creation.

By the gift of the Spirit, by the anointing he shares with us, he restores us to our priestly and kingly vocation. We now can offer ourselves, our souls and bodies to be a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice to God. We can offer God our tithe, our acknowledgment that it is all his. We can live thankful lives. As St. Paul says, “In everything give thanks, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). And we can once again enjoy God’s blessing on all things.

We can now conquer our enemies. We can subdue the flesh to the Spirit, we can overcome the world; we can crush Satan under our feet (Romans 16:20)—by the power of God that is in us. In Christ, we are restored to our rightful dominion over the creation.

To be sure, we experience this conquest of the world, the flesh and the devil as a process. But we should always be strengthened by the truth that Christ is in us and he is stronger than all of our enemies. “I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

The biggest problem in the life of faith is that we forget our baptismal identity. We come to accept the identities given to us by the world—consumer, lover of money, slave to desires. We gather around the altar, we “do this in remembrance” to remember again who Jesus is and that we are in him.

Here we exercise our priesthood; we offer ourselves and, indeed, the whole creation back to God. Here our sins are forgiven and we are strengthened by the Holy Spirit so that we can conquer our enemies. Here we remember that the Spirit of God and the favor of God rest upon us. The whole of the Christian life, as we leave the altar, is to live a manner of life that is appropriate for kings, priests and beloved children of God.