

## Fulfilling all righteousness

This is the year when most of our gospel readings will be drawn from Matthew. With that in mind, I've started reading a book on the theology of Matthew's Gospel. A feature unique to Matthew's presentation of Jesus' baptism is John's recognition of Jesus and his consequent reticence: *I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?* Jesus' response? *Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.*

My guide identifies *righteousness* as a key word in this gospel (it will feature heavily in the Sermon on the Mount); while an over-arching theme is the obedience of the Son of God to what he instinctively knows to be his Father's will: an obedience which is to be reflected in the Christian community he initiates. I'll be on the look out for evidence of this as we read through the Gospel; but we've already seen Matthew stress the obedience of Joseph: first of all as a *righteous* and compassionate man, planning to dismiss Mary quietly when he learns of her pregnancy; but then obedient to God's will as communicated by the angel in his dream, taking Mary to be his wife and adopting her son as his own.

Obedience is not a popular concept in a post-Holocaust world, with the shadow of those who were *just obeying orders*; but we need to bear in mind that this is faithfulness to one who is all goodness and completely trustworthy. If what is asked appears to be contrary to our understanding of what is right and good, it may well be in order that something greater may take place or be revealed.

In today's Gospel, it is John who has to change his mind, giving way to the demands of righteousness to which Jesus refers him, and consenting to baptize him. As a consequence, the Spirit descends and the Father's declaration of Jesus' beloved identity is heard (addressing all and sundry, rather than, as in the Gospel according to Mark, Jesus himself).

Jumping to the end of Matthew, Jesus' charge to baptize will be extended to the Eleven and their successors: *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.* Those who receive that baptism are then to be taught *to obey everything that [Jesus] has commanded* them.

Undergoing baptism is thus an expression of a desire and intention to be faithful to the will of God, as imparted by the *commands* (the teaching and example) of Jesus.

And baptism is what Jesus submits himself to, at the hands of John. That puts me in mind of an Epiphanytide canticle in *Common Worship: Daily Prayer*, entitled *A Song of Ephrem the Syrian*. Ephrem, Wikipedia tells me, lived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and is one of the most notable hymnographers of Eastern Christianity.

The second half of the canticle (which may be from a separate composition from the first) hints at the self-emptying of the Son of God which is one of the wonders of the incarnation. In the famous hymn in Philippians, this humbling of himself is extended to Jesus' submission to death on a cross; as a result of which, God exalts him and bestows on him the authority so evident in Matthew's Gospel.

Part of a Song of Ephrem the Syrian:-

5 How wonderful your footsteps, walking on the waters! ♦  
You subdued the great sea beneath your feet.

6 Yet to a little stream you subjected your head, ♦  
Bending down to be baptized in it.

7 The stream was like John who performed the baptism in it, ♦  
In their smallness each an image of the other.

8 To the stream so little, to the servant so weak, ♦  
The Lord of them both subjected himself.