

"Mystery Man"

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Reading: Isaiah 42.1-9

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen, in whom my soul delights;
I have put my spirit upon him;
he will bring forth justice to the nations.
He will not cry or lift up his voice,
or make it heard in the street;
a bruised reed he will not break,
and a dimly burning wick he will not quench;
he will faithfully bring forth justice.
He will not grow faint or be crushed
until he has established justice in the earth;
and the coastlands wait for his teaching.

Thus says God, the LORD,
who created the heavens and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and what comes from it,
who gives breath to the people upon it
and spirit to those who walk in it:
I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness,
I have taken you by the hand and kept you;
I have given you as a covenant to the people,
a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.
I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other,
nor my praise to idols.

See, the former things have come to pass,
and new things I now declare;
before they spring forth,
I tell you of them.

Matthew 3.13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

May God bless to our understanding these words from the Holy Scriptures.

If you were here last week you'll remember that we were talking about the 10,000 Hour Rule that Malcolm Gladwell reports on in *Outliers* – it's the observation that, in an oddly consistent way across fields of endeavour, it takes about 10,000 hours to develop real competency in something important. This sparked a lot of comment and reflection and laughter, in conversation hour and through the week. Not that we think one can actually master the spiritual life, as one might master chess or violin playing, but the recognition that if it is important, you have to invest in it. Some people tried to figure out the arithmetic – what *does* 10,000 hours amount to? Quick arithmetic – think of it as ten hours a day for a thousand days – about three years. If ten hours a day seems excessive, you could call it two hours a day for fifteen years, or one hour for thirty. (27 years and four months really)

To some extent, we were sharing our sense of dismay – what if I don't have 10,000 hours left, said one person? Well, I doubt that any of us is starting from scratch. But then, when it comes to the spiritual life, what would count? Surely, the care we

show, the visits we make to one another, the hours we put in as volunteers in programs for the vulnerable, or political activism. Somebody took the manger cloths to the cleaners. Somebody put away the Advent wreath. Somebody spent time figuring out a sermon topic for next week's service. Somebody came to the community café. The time we spend listening. The reading. What about cooking, cooking can be done as a spiritual offering. We've already had coffee, and I can smell the aroma of our community lunch.

Or the time that one spends in prayer. Does it count if you are lying in bed at the time? (I vote, yes.) It does begin to add up.

And then, on about Wednesday, someone said, yes but you can put in the ten thousand hours and still not master the thing, if you have no aptitude. We were talking about music, but it sparked a reflection on the question of spiritual aptitude ...what would we call, spiritual aptitude?

You can see how this leads to today's story from the Gospel of Matthew. A large crowd from all over Judea was assembled there, at the side of the river Jordan. They were certainly putting in the hours. John the Baptist had just finished a riveting sermon of the old school, in which the preacher excoriates the gathered faithful. Remember, we had this reading in Advent, he calls them vipers, and tells them to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Each one is invited forward to be baptized in the river, a fairly common practice, signifying forgiveness and new beginnings. And then John says, but this is nothing, because there is another person coming – someone more intense even than John, more powerful and energetic. Someone who really has the aptitude. Someone who, as Henry Vaughan imagined it in the poem that David set to music in today's anthem, would embody the brilliant quickness and shimmering ardour of the starry skies. One who will baptize not just with water but with fire and the spirit, John says. Like Vaughan, the Baptist feels that his own passion pales beside this extraordinary and mysterious figure. I'm not even worthy to carry his sandals, he says. So the stage is set for the appearance of the star.

And perfectly on cue, Jesus appears. It's a wonderful tableau.

Now, of course as readers and listeners who practice the Christian faith, we feel we know about Jesus. That we know he is around thirty years old, and that amazing stories about his birth abound, plus one little anecdote about him at twelve. But actually, that's about all we do know at this point in his life. Did he study a lot? Had he already spent ten thousand hours in spiritual formation? Was he trained in the Temple at all? Or in public speaking? Short or tall? Athletic or sedentary? Not married – was he gay or straight, or a bit of both? Could he carry a tune? We wonder about the life he lived. How did he become who he was? We really don't know. The first thirty years of his life are quite a mystery. **He** is a mystery. All we know is that John the Baptist said to him – you should be baptizing me.

But Jesus demurs. He doesn't pick up the honour and distinction that is offered. He has come to be with the people. To place himself alongside them in complete solidarity. That is his whole objective. As in the words of the carol, *Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel. (Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king!)* Wherever he is in his own hours count, he gives himself to the spiritual practices of the people he has come to serve.

In doing so, Jesus confirms his true vocation. His call is not to glory but to gentleness. Not to magnificence but to justice. As they look at him, they see the words of Isaiah (which John read to us) brought to life: *He will not shout or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the marketplace. A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench.* This is very good news for the dimly burning wicks in the crowd both then and now. A wonderful promise for every bruised reed among us. *He will faithfully bring forth justice, it says, he will not falter, he will not be discouraged.* Yet we know that his work will meet resistance and that he will know pain. When God's own love comes to live with humanity, the cost will be high. The lifeblood that carries the goodness of his breath through arteries and muscles, and warms his heart – that blood will be spilled.

As it turns out that day by the Jordan, Jesus takes off his own sandals, and wades into the river. And there he stands, breathing, soaking wet, feet in the mud with all the

sinners. And John does baptize him. But then, see what happens! As he rises from the water, the sky opens and the mystery deepens.

It turns out that Jesus' vocation is more complex than simple solidarity. He shares our life but he lives it in a way that is altogether new. Somehow, as the first hymn of the Christians exults, *he is the image of the invisible God*. He is what God looks like. *In him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell*. And not only that, but it shows. It shines through. The light that he bears, the shocking truth of the divine reality, is affirmed at his baptism. The amplitude of it. The compassion. The beauty. The tears. Like the light shining through water that Emily showed the children this morning, the light of God shines and fractures and dances and multiplies and spreads through the one whom God calls beloved. The mystery man.

Come then my God, shine on this blood and water in one beam and thou shalt see, kindled by thee both liquors burn and stream. Blood and water, breath and light, voice and shadow. As the Spirit descends on that water, alighting gently as a dove on Jesus, the blood of humanity and the light of God are joined in the love which gives life to all life.

At the Jordan the fire is kindled, and the mission is launched.

Thanks be to God. Amen.