

SERVANTS OF GOD

January 11, 2025

(Baptism of Jesus)

READINGS¹

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

REFLECTION (Rev. Toby Keva)

I would like to continue my talk during the Family Time about my ordination. Again, I was ordained on 22nd October 2011, so almost 15 years ago!

Now, there are many parts in the order of service of Ordination of Minister of the Word in the Uniting Church. But, for me, the most important part of all is the part called, the Charge. It states clearly the tasks that the Church specifically asks the ordained person to do.

So, let me highlight some of the important aspects of the Charge from the service of my Ordination almost 15 years ago.

“THE CHARGE

The Moderator delivers the Charges:

Toby,

in the name of Jesus Christ, the only Head of the Church, we are here to ordain you as a minister of the Word by prayer and the laying on of hands. As a minister of the Word, you are called to receive the witness to Christ in the holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and to proclaim from them the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed.

...

¹ New English Translation of the Bible.

Taking Christ the Good Shepherd as your example, you are called to lead God's people in worship, witness and service; to equip them for their ministry and mission; and to work with them in building up the body of Christ.

You are called to strive for peace and unity among all Christian people, especially among those with whom you serve.

...

you will diligently teach Christ's people, reminding them of the centrality of the person and work of Jesus Christ and the grace which justifies them through faith.

You will announce the good news of God in Christ to those beyond the community of faith, stand alongside those who suffer, and work for justice and peace in the world.

Relying on the power of the Holy Spirit, you will be diligent in the study of the Bible, you will seek to live a holy and disciplined life and be faithful in prayer."

This charge, for me, represents the core functions of a Minister. So, I like to read it, every now and then, to remind myself of the main task that I have been called to do.

Jesus' baptism, which is the focus of our reading today from the Gospel of Matthew, is actually more similar to an Ordination than to a baptism in the Church today. "How come?" you may ask. First, we need to understand what is the meaning of Jesus' baptism by John in the River Jordan.

Now, during the time of John the Baptist, the Jews had already practiced ritual cleansing by immersion known as a *mikveh*. Unlike today's baptism, however, this could be repeated as necessary.² (Baptism, in most mainline Christian denominations, is done only once in a lifetime.) The Essenes, the Jewish

² Diane G. Chen, *Commentary on Matthew 3:13-17*, from Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, Baptism of Our Lord (Year A).

community at Qumran, also had already practised ritual washing as purification.³

John was obviously influenced by these practices around him. So his baptism in Matthew's Gospel, therefore, is also a purification ritual, which means that the baptism that John performs does not exactly carry the same meaning with the baptism that we do in the Church today. Christian baptism is the outer sign of the grace of God in Christ Jesus. It marks our inclusion into God's family, the Church.

John's baptism, on the other hand, is mainly about the forgiveness of one's sin and the cleansing of one's self. No wonder that when Jesus asks John to baptize him, John initially refuses. In John's eyes, Jesus needs no purification as he is already clean.

So, even though John eventually relents and baptizes Jesus, his baptism has a different meaning and purpose, again, from the other baptisms that John does.

Unlike the other baptisms that John performs, Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his ministry. It's a public announcement of the start of his ministry. It declares to the public that such person now occupies a particular office, and that while, from now on, he is entitled to some privileges, he is also bound to perform particular duties.

But, if Jesus' baptism is similar to an ordination or a commission "Where is the charge?" you may ask. Where is the list of duties that he needs to perform?

³ Diane G. Chen, *Commentary on Matthew 3:13-17*, from Working Preacher from Luther Seminary, Baptism of Our Lord (Year A).

Now, it may not be obvious for us, but for the Jewish Christians, who heard this episode in Jesus' life for the very first time, they would have known immediately where to find it.

See, the language used in Jesus' baptism is very similar to the language used in our reading today from Isaiah. In other words, Jesus' baptism points back to the old prophecy in Isaiah about the 'servant of God. Just like God introduces the servant in Isaiah as someone whom God takes pleasure,⁴ after his baptism, God also introduces Jesus as God's Son in whom God takes delight.⁵ And just like God puts God's spirit upon the servant in Isaiah,⁶ God's Spirit also descends and rests on Jesus.⁷

But, if you still have any doubt that, for the early Christian communities, Jesus was the fulfillment of the prophecy in Isaiah, you only need to read the Gospel of Luke. There, there is an episode when Jesus reads a similar passage from Isaiah about the servant of God.

“The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has chosen me.
He has *commissioned* me to encourage the poor,
to help the brokenhearted,
to decree the release of captives,
and the freeing of prisoners,
to announce the year when the Lord will show his favor,
the day when our God will seek vengeance,
to console all who mourn”
(Isaiah 61:1-2 NET)

⁴ “Here is my servant whom I support, my chosen one in whom I take pleasure.” (Isaiah 42:1 NET)

⁵ “This is my one dear Son; in him I take great delight.” (Matthew 3:17 NET)

⁶ “I have put my spirit upon him....” (Isaiah 42:1 NRSV)

⁷ “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw God's Spirit descending like a dove and alighting on him.” (Matthew 3:16 NRSV)

Jesus then declares, to the people in the synagogue that this prophecy has been fulfilled in him!⁸

So, have no doubt that, in the eye of Matthew and Luke and their fellow Christians back then, Jesus was the long-awaited God's servant in Isaiah. It is in the passage in Isaiah where we will find the 'charge' of the servant of God, similar to the one that Jesus reads in the Synagogue:

“I, the LORD, officially commission you;
I take hold of your hand.
I protect you and make you a covenant mediator for people,
and a light to the nations,
to open blind eyes,
to release prisoners from dungeons,
those who live in darkness from prisons.”
(Isaiah 42:6-7 NET)

But, just like in a good movie, the moment we think that we have everything there is to draw a conclusion, there is a twist in the plot! And the twist is this: when a Jewish person reads the passage that we have today from Isaiah, for her, the servant of God is not Jesus. No. For a Jewish person, the servant of God is Israel! Indeed, in Isaiah, God calls Israel repeatedly as God's servant.⁹

So, who exactly is God's servant in our reading from the book of Isaiah then? Is he Jesus or is he Israel?

I don't think we have to choose between the two options. We can still be a faithful Christian when we declare that God's servant in Isaiah points *both* to Jesus and to the people of Israel.

⁸ See Luke 4:16-21.

⁹ See Isaiah 41:8-9, 44:1-21, 49:3.

Now, Paul declares that the Church is the ‘new’ Israel;¹⁰ which means that the Church is also called to be the servant of God in Isaiah. That means God also commissions us to be the one who points other people to God, to be the light for all people, to open the eyes of those who are blind, and to free people from all kinds of bondage. The ‘charge’ in Isaiah is our charge! God has commissioned us to be God’s servant in the world!

Jesus is our prototype, which comes two Greek words: *protos* (πρῶτος), meaning first, foremost, or chief and *typos* (τύπος), meaning model. Jesus is our first and foremost model. By learning from and modeling his life, we can learn how to become God’s servant in this world.

So, let me finish the reflection today by quoting this beautiful poem by 16th Century Carmelite Nun, Teresa of Avila:

“Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”

¹⁰ “I will call those who were not my people, ‘My people,’
and I will call her who was unloved, ‘My beloved.’”
“And in the very place where it was said to them,
‘You are not my people,’
there they will be called ‘sons of the living God.’”
(Romans 9:26 NET)

Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How do you feel when you hear that you too have been 'commissioned' as God's servant like Jesus and Israel? Do you feel daunted, excited, or both?
2. What's the one thing in Jesus' life that you can model as you respond to God's calling as God's servant?