

Matthew 3

Listening to Owls

Amongst my Christmas presents was a book of poetry. Now, and quickly, before you bury your head in your hands, I solemnly promise not to read you a long poem. I like poems, but I am not sure they belong in pulpits. A colleague (not a Bristol colleague, before you ask) once read a long poem in a sermon. He was preaching to an entire ship's company and rows and rows of able seaman sat there staring at him, absolutely baffled. Anyway, my new book of poems introduced me to a story I did not know. In the eighteenth century, in Hampshire, an Anglican clergyman wrote a natural history of his village. Gilbert White's, *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne* is, actually, a famous book and still in print. There is a biography of Gilbert White. He is famous, his house is a museum. Now I discover he had a brother, a man who was not famous at all, Henry; Henry the obscure. The Revd Henry White, however, does get a footnote in *The Natural History ... of Selborne*. He gets mentioned, and he got a poem written about him, because the one interesting thing he did was to go out one night in the village listening to owls calling to one another. He had a pitch pipe with him and he told his brother, who wrote it down, that owls have a distinctive call. And here I need to give you a poetry warning, because this is a quotation. He

*found that each one sang, or rather hooted,
Precisely in the measure of B flat.
And that is all that history has noted;
We know no more of Henry White than that.ⁱ*

He wrote no book himself, governed no nation, made no great discovery. Just one night he went out, in his clerical hat and coat, and blew b flats on a pocket pitch pipe while the owls hooted. It wasn't brave, or clever and it made not a blind bit of difference to anything, but I am stupidly glad to live in a world where someone does something like that. I like the innocent, harmless, unassuming people who do not want to catch your eye, or corner you and put you right. I admire the people who do not want to stand centre stage. I got lovely emails after our Christmas service and one just headed *disgrace* which told me off, at some length, for something I haven't even done. Thank God for people who have no axe to grind.

Fix that in our heads, recognise that virtue does not always have to blow a trumpet and be introduced by applause and we begin to get close to an important idea buried in our gospel reading this morning. I have preached many times on this Sunday on the year, I have a raft of sermons on the Baptism of Christ and one way or another I have made the same point over and over again. On this Sunday we are supposed to notice that in a wilderness where you do not look for water, in a nation too deep in despair to hope for salvation the Son of God bursts forth upon the scene. We are in the season of epiphany, the time of year for grand visions, and sudden revelations. The baby in the manger catches our eye and we suddenly notice that we underestimated him, born on a day of the week this is the Lord of Eternity, held by a mother in her arms, this is the Christ who holds destiny in his hands. It is strong stuff this morning.

And it is also something else. We caught a hint of that in our readings,

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?'

That was our gospel. There is almost a note of panic there, Matthew is puzzled, anxious even, that the Christ of God needs to be baptised by this wild-eyed fundamentalist paddling in the Jordan. When one of the 'gospels' that did not quite pass muster for the New Testament tells the same story, it has John the Baptist fall down at Jesus' feet and say

I beseech thee Lord, baptize thou me."

It fussed the writers of the New Testament that Jesus, the Christ, had to go to John for anything. After all, this was the Alpha and Omega, the First and Last, he needed nothing John could give. In the hands of St Luke, who wrote the Acts of the Apostles and the passage we heard in our second reading, the story sounds quite different

he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power

Do you see? No mention of John actually baptising Jesus, it is just a baptism he *announced*. And all the emphasis is on what God does, anointing Jesus with the Spirit and with power.

Just from a moment we see the evangelists stumble as we come to the Jordan. What are they to say about this strange moment when Jesus submits to a rite he does not need, as if the one who is sinless needed to be washed, the one who was God himself needed to be dedicated?

What we are dealing with here is a profound theme in scripture, the idea that appearances deceive, that God for all his greatness and glory behaves in ways that are hard to understand. He is almighty, omnipotent and understated. Scripture keeps noticing that God's plans appear to be frustrated, the happy ending does not come, the good suffer and the evil prosper. Think of all those psalms

*I saw the prosperity of the wicked.
For they have no pain; their bodies are sound and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are; they are not plagued like other people.
Therefore pride is their necklace; violence covers them like a garment. Psalm 73:3-6*

Think of Moses hiding in Horeb, or Jeremiah persecuted for telling the truth. It is not a great catalogue of triumph, the heroes keep falling down on the job, they worry that words will fail them. In Hebrew there is a word for people like this – *zaddiq* – a harassed persecuted person in whom the hope of God survives. When God sends his son to save us, that is what we got, the persecuted man who died on a cross. And it started that day at the Jordan when Jesus submitted to baptism. He did not do something, something was done to him.

I watched *The Life of Brian* again over Christmas and heard again that absurd account of the Sermon on the Mount. There is confusion over what Christ is saying, 'He said "Blessed are the Greek".'

Oh, it's blessed are the MEEK! Oh, I'm glad they're getting something, they have a hell of a time

But it turns out to be a serious point. Salvation and righteousness do not swing a sword, nor blow a bugle. We are so obsessed with getting things done, so hung up on achievement that we make God do the same thing. I have heard people talk about God's plan or God's agenda as though the Lord himself, has unfinished business, a *to do* list. There is nothing God still needs to do. We have to have reasons for everything, dress up all our activities with destiny. *I am going to have a drink with Jones in case he needs to talk.* Why can't I just have a drink because it is a nice thing to do? God does not need reasons, does not have work on hand. Meister Eckhart used to explain that God acts without a reason why.

That is what we meet today at the Jordan, the Christ who does not impose himself, take the lead, stick to the agenda. This is the Jesus described in Philippians, the one who 'humbles himself'. Here is Jesus who can precisely be met when we do the ordinary things and truly lives the life we live.

Give me the meek and dear Henry White with his pitch pipe and his owls. Deliver me from all those people who shouted at me last year about 'taking the initiative' and 'being great' and 'getting our way'. It is not the gospel. Bring me to the Jordan and to my own baptism when I died to myself so that I could rise with Christ. We will not find the God who redeems if we are busy with our own enterprise and we will miss him if we look in the bazaars and at the banquets. Give me the meek the ones who inherit the earth. They inherit it notice, they never earned it. It was a gift. Stop the bus that demands I complete the itinerary, I want to get off.

Jesus has come to the Jordan and submitted to baptism. The story of salvation is announced at the beginning of the year and it is not for those who keep resolutions, it is for those who have empty hands and are happy to be given what they never deserved and what they did not dare to ask for.

So, if you have resolutions for New Year, good luck with that. I hope you do indeed get fit, finish the novel, and learn to pogo. Here and now, however, let's pause at the waters of the Jordan and remind ourselves that salvation is God's to give not ours to take. Let's learn gratitude and humility and, in the year ahead, may none of us be too busy, or too important, to listen to owls.

ⁱ The poem is called B Flat and it is by Douglas Stewart

ⁱⁱ Gospel of the Ebionites 4 (John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* p. 233).