

Hope, Even When the News is Grim

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, January 9, 2011.
The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
Based on Matthew 3:13-17.*

It's always a celebration when we baptize and welcome new members into our community, particularly children. We celebrate their parents and sponsors who are giving them a start on a life of faith. And the historical baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan, one of the principal occasions for public baptism, is always a cause for celebration.

And celebrate we do.

But I've set aside what I originally wrote for this morning, because this is a morning when we wake up to an America once again in mourning. In Tucson, six are dead, including a little third-grade girl, a federal judge and several senior citizens who had come to talk to their member of Congress, who was gravely wounded. In all, 18 were shot, apparently and allegedly by a troubled 22-year old man.

I believe there are a few things we can and should say, some of them connected to our baptismal celebration—though, God help us, not in the way we planned or would want.

It's the baptismal covenant itself that enjoins us "whenever we fall into sin, to repent and return." We can say that it's one sick shooter who has sinned, and needs to repent. Most would immediately add that punishment needs to be added to repentance and help.

But is it only the shooter that needs to repent?

We also promise—and remember, at any baptism that each of us renews this promise—to "strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."

Surely that promise is violated not only by violence in deed but also by violence in words, by violence in discourse in social, civic and political life. Surely the unease we feel as we awoke this morning in America is that we need to repent and rethink how we live with one another, how we disagree with one another, and how we regulate the passions, and yes the sicknesses, that sometimes afflict us.

In Matthew's account of John baptizing Jesus, there's an exchange not found in the other versions:

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." (Matt. 3:14)

It's probable that this is really the voice of the young church, covering its embarrassment that a Jesus it was proclaiming to be sinless had submitted to baptism at all. That's not our issue, and in fact we might even see some wisdom underlying that apparent embarrassment: none of us, even the one our tradition calls our Lord, can go it alone.

Human life, lived in human community, is unbearably complex. To live, we need grounding, tradition, inner strength, guidance and wisdom. All that and more we need to receive with great heaps of love.

The quest for the wisdom to live, and to satisfy our need for love—these are more than ancient drives. They are drives embedded, it would seem, in our genes.

Jesus came along at a point in time and to a people who were, in some notable degree, wringing their hands. It was a fraught period, among people proud of their distinctive spiritual heritage, their relationship with the universal God, their own ethical imperatives. All that good and promise seemed to be losing steam among a people captive to imperial Rome, the world's greatest power.

Rome itself was conscious of a heritage, one that included a number of religious expressions and incorporated in and added to the enormous output of the classical Greek philosophers. All, including Jesus in his powerfully singular way, were looking for the key to the human dilemma and possibility.

Shakespeare famously captured one side of that human mystery in the play, *Julius Caesar*. He has Cassius say:

"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings." (*Julius Caesar*, 1, ii, 140-141)

In the drama, Cassius wanted to recruit Brutus to the conspiracy against the emperor, who, he reminded his friend, was not a god but a human equal. But the deeper wisdom of these words is that blind fate does not drive our decisions, but rather the human condition itself.

It's one contribution of the Christian tradition that we can be honest about our humanness and still have hope. And it's the particular genius of Jesus that we find that hope not in laws and external solutions but, in fact, in ourselves.

Yes, ourselves—but not ourselves alone. That's key. And that's the truth that leads these parents to bring these children to the water and spirit of baptism.

In Jesus, which is what we're baptized into, we hear the call of an invisible "kingdom," and we seek the strength in God and from community, to conform our messy society into some ever growing imitation of that kingdom. We learn that it is a way of life built on trust, on celebration, on overcoming the power of demons within. That kingdom is where those who seek will find.

In that place, to which these children are now being welcomed, we know that rewards are intrinsic, that there is humor and humility, and that greatness is in service and in recognizing the god within others and ourselves.

That is more beautiful and more hopeful than the grim news that greeted us this morning. As long as there are baptisms, at whatever age, as long as there is humble seeking and loads of love, *there is hope*.

May God bless these children, their parents and us all.

©2011 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

*For information about St. Bartholomew's
and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads
write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022,
or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.*