

January 9, 2011

The Galley Slave

¹⁰*And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. Mark 1:10*

*This the baptism of the Saviour
Greatly longed to undergo
This the crimson cleansing needed
So the world God's love might know.*

Have you ever rowed as a galley slave? Maybe your galley was a kitchen in a small apartment with children, or on a boat or above on a plane? Keeping with water invoking images of work "Maybe you were in the typing pool" feeling like you were drowning with the nameless non-descript masses. Maybe you just cleaned out the pool or cut the grass around the pool. Have you every rowed with the slaves? Sometimes we call them "Joe-jobs". I suppose it comes from the American GI Joe "General Issue"; a common name; non-descript; a nameless number caught in faceless bureaucracy.

For most people it's easy to feel forgotten.

But even if you have somehow attained great stature, position and rank. Enter a hospital and become a patient, only partially clothed a room, with an address which sounds no better than a cell-block number and the playing field is leveled. You learn to row like a galley slave. You experience the emotions of the galley slave: hopelessness, despair a sense of drowning before you've drowned. Remember the story of Ben Hur, a prince of Israel, who became a number, literally a galley slave. See the real life stories of Tsunami's and ship wrecks and floods of all kinds. Rich and poor; the strong and the weak, equally swallowed up. Live long enough and experience long enough and you'll row with the slaves.

Know of your humanity and you'll know what it is to row with the slaves. We are, after all, by nature a slave to sin. Jesus spoke undeniable truth saying, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits **sin** is a **slave** to **sin**. Anyone attempting to overcome their vices in this still relatively New Year knows of the difficulties involved. Often its two steps forward and three steps back. Often its one vice exchanged for another. And even when victory over actions seems complete, the heart is desperately deceitful always trying to lure you back. Search your heart and you know that you have sinned. Your conscience weighs on you heavier than any shackles.

You who row with slaves what can bring you hope on this ship?

What if the Captain came down not to chastise but to encourage you?

In this life, we may have seen some exceptional leaders. They are true servants. They come down and row with the slaves. We see that in the likes of a Winston Churchill who ventured forth repeatedly in harm's way. We see that even in some of our politicians who embed themselves with the troops for a fortnight. We see that in popular culture where one of the "reality shows" has

“Undercover boss” and the CEO accustomed to life of boardrooms, manicures and 4 course lunches flips burgers for an afternoon. And though it’s only really a visit, those who row with the slaves earn respect, understanding, and ironically, by becoming weak, they become strong.

But try as some of these might, they only really play at it. But there is a servant-king who doesn’t just descend for a visit. He becomes “one with sinners” as we sang. He says, “Throw me into the thick of it”. He says, “Cast me into the waters”. He is the Prophet who fulfills the prophet Jonah not only in the three days in the belly of the great fish through his death and resurrection. He fulfills the life of Jonah who said “Cast me into the deep waters”. He says “Cast me in that you may be saved”.

The scene of baptism is so often depicted as tranquil, serene and everything stereotypically spiritual. But here, as Mark’s Gospel depicts it “the heavens are torn open”. At a spiritual level which is the only true reality, our Lord descends into mighty waters. Jesus enters into public life and the heavens are torn open.

While it is noted that all Judea and Jerusalem come out to be baptized by John, there is one who comes from further afield. He comes from Nazareth in Galilee. Can any good come from Galilee cries out Nathanael? “Hardly” is the unspoken response. Indeed. It’s the gateway into darkness. It’s a half pagan land yet Jesus goes there and then comes from there to see John the Baptizer and descends into the waters on the banks of the Jordan river.

But the greater mystery isn’t so much that he comes from Galilee. It’s where he came from before that. He is the sinless Son of God. He has no reason to venture here. The great heroes of history have every reason to stand on the fire step with their troops. But this fight is not our Lord’s. He has no sin. He is the righteous one.

From the moment of conception by virtue of being conceived by the Holy Spirit his holiness is assured. At the eighth day of life he is circumcised according to the law. When the days of Mary’s purification are accomplished he was presented as a first born son in the temple once again according to the Law. When he grew in years until he became the 12 year old Jesus about his “Father’s Business” in the Temple debating with the good doctors he shows his conformity to the fourth commandment and honours his mother and father so he went with them and was obedient to them. “Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man”. In all this, he fulfilled righteousness. In all this we ought to stand amazed. He is the righteous one. Still, the work continues.

He has no reason to enter the mighty waters. But out of Love he descends to drown with us and for us. He comes first to Bethlehem and then Nazareth in Galilee. He comes from further afield because he represents all those who come from the four corners of the earth. He is the Saviour of All. He desires to sacrifice his life for us all. He desires to fulfill all righteousness. He shall be the perfect sacrifice to buy us out of the slave ship. It comes with great cost to the Christ and nothing to us.

He pays with his precious blood. What are the deep waters but a symbol of death? The Great Flood. Picture Dore’s “The End of all Flesh”. Whether you are immersed in the baptismal waters, have them poured over you, or sprinkled thrice in the Name of the Triune God, DEATH is the sign. Jesus first enters into death. He sheds his blood on the cross. It is with great reason that the cross and the font are joined together here as we sang. “This is the crimson cleansing”.

But thanks be to God, he is “Firstborn risen from the dead” as Paul describes it. He emerges from the waters, even as the Heavenly Father speaks his approval. “This is my Son with whom I am well pleased”. The Father’s voice foretells his resurrection.

The essential work of Christ is foretold by his death and resurrection in his baptism. You Christians who are the baptized take note. “If we suffer in a death like his we shall surely share in a resurrection like his”. We can expect to hear the approving voice of the Father as surely as Jesus heard it “Well done, good and faithful servant”.

You who are baptized in the name rejoice. You have left the ship of death and the ship of fools. You are sitting in the nave of a new ship called “church”. This ship charts a different course. It carries us to life. It sails through the troubled waters.

But all around us are those who are drowning trying to be gods of their own, or they are immersed in the false religions and philosophies of our age. They sail on ships chartered by captains all resembling “Charon” the Greek god of the underworld, ferrying his cargo of souls over the river Styx to Hades. By every description he is hideous to behold and life is drudgery to all who serve him on his ship.

*There Charon stands, who rules the dreary coast -
A sordid god: down from his hairy chin
A length of beard descends, uncombed, unclean;
His eyes, like hollow furnaces on fire;
A girdle, foul with grease, binds his obscene attire.* ^[5]

If you read your Greek mythology you discover that all who pass on this ship must pay the ferryman. And what do they pay for? They pay to be taken to darkness. They are but shades of their former selves. It is not a happy place. Heaven is not for dwellers of the Light as Scripture depicts it but in most other faiths like the Spiritualists, it is the realm of the shades, spirits, shells of their former selves who would desire to haunt the living.

But for the baptized on this ship called Church we have the ferryman himself who gladly pays the fare. It’s more than popping a coin to Charon. Maybe that’s the issue. You get what you pay for. Christ has paid the ultimate price. He has shed his innocent blood. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, cries forth John the Baptist. We journey to the light.

The Collect of the day was written and used for centuries to summarize the essential message of the day. Today’s collect is no different. We pray, “Make all those baptized into Christ faithful in their calling as Your children and inheritors with Him of everlasting life”. Our callings may differ in some specifics but all the children of God share the one calling of sharing the mission of the Church. “Go forth and baptize all nations...teaching them to obey all things”. Encourage others to board this ship. It journeys towards the true Light even as it is commanded by the Light of the World especially in this season of Light which is Epiphany.

Amen.