

## Epiphany II

***Listen to me, O coastlands, pay attention, you peoples from far away! The Lord called me before I was born, while I was in my other's womb Gad named me. Isaiah 49:1***

Last week we heard something about Isaiah's vision of the Servant and we heard Matthew's version of the baptism of Jesus. This week we hear some of the Servant's speech in reply to God's call, and we hear John's version of Jesus' baptism. Last week we welcomed Lindsay Cannon into the Body of Christ through the sacrament of Holy Baptism. And also last week the Church ordained Jeff Mello and a small army of other deacons to the Sacred Order of the Priesthood. And this week we remember in our thoughts and prayers the life and work and martyrdom of the Reverend Martin Luther King Junior.

Bishop Cederholm preached last week at the ordination. His wife was recovering from open-heart surgery the day before; he was understandably distracted and rambled more than is his usual custom. I must confess that most of these ordination sermons pass quickly from my memory, (partly because of *them* and partly because of *me*) But about halfway through Bud's sermon I came alert and thought, *this sounds familiar, this sounds like the same theme Bishop Shaw preached at Jeff's diaconal ordination last June.*

Bud was preaching about the priesthood of all believers. Now, that's perfectly good theology: we all are called, as Christians, to ministry of one kind or another. But it seemed an odd theme for an ordination: a sacramental occasion at which we, at the very least, set certain people apart to do specific tasks and to take on certain roles. I think you all know that I have a rather "low" and functional theology of the priesthood, which I've pretty much just summed up: priests are called to do particular things within the Church and for the Church.

This does not make us more holy, or special in any particularly sacrosanct way, in my belief. But we are different, because we do different things. Namely, we consecrate the elements and celebrate the eucharist, and we pronounce absolution. Those are the only functions that are reserved for priests.

I could argue, and I do, that performing those functions over and over, week after week and year after year transforms us, makes us different in some way, just as any

behavior, repeated over time, makes anyone different. Do we become closer to God? Some of us probably do, and some of us not. I would say, if we are being true to our vocation, our call, celebrating the eucharist regularly will bring us closer to the heart of the Church, and into a more intimate relationship with the mystery of the sacraments. But that's certainly unquantifiable, and difficult even to articulate.

I also believe, and I say this to anyone who comes to me to talk about ordination, I believe that those who are called to priesthood are called to lead congregations. If you don't have the stomach for leadership, I say, but feel called to ordination, the Church is calling you to the vocation of a deacon: a servant ministry of carrying the Church into the world and bringing the world into the Church. Vocational deacons, that is, are called to have day jobs in the secular world and to serve congregations in other roles than presider.

And as with celebrating the eucharist over time, leading congregations over time changes us as well, I am sure. Some of us are humbled by the challenges of leadership, some abuse the privileges of leadership, some of us burn out quickly and some go from strength to strength. But we are all changed.

Beyond that, what can I say about the priesthood? Paul says this in his first letter to the Corinthians:

*And in the church God has appointed first of all **apostles**, second **prophets**, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.*

But he's not talking about the priesthood –which in any event hardly existed when he was writing– he's talking about all followers of Jesus. The point is that we all have very different gifts, lay and ordained alike, and when Paul talks about first and second he is not privileging apostles and prophets, he's just ticking off his list.

I find myself musing about these matters of ordination and baptism, the order of priesthood and the priesthood of all believers, partly because of the sacraments of last weekend but also because of a meeting I had with Tom Shaw before Christmas. He was reflecting about my ministry, and our ministry here at St John's, and he said, among other things, "you certainly have raised up and trained up a lot of good people for ministry there at St. John's." " And I thought of the marvelous array of stars whom we have sponsored for ordination and those who have done field work here: Libby Berman, Arrington Chambliss, Mark Nestlehutt, Matthew Cadwell, Gretchen, and Jeff, and Heidi Fieldston, Susan Ackley, Mark Kozielec, Caroline Vogel, and now Steve. And then there

are those who were not such delights to work with, whose call to ordination was in doubt to us here, and whose names have perhaps, as Ecclesiastes says, faded from memory.

But whether they were stars or, in some cases, a bit more like black holes, these folks who have passed through our doors have been served well by us. Whether we have affirmed their call to ordination or questioned it fundamentally, we have taken them and their perceived calls seriously, we have worked with them in discernment and formation, and we have sent them out into the world to serve in one capacity or another. (Well, we haven't sent them all yet, thankfully. Gretchen and Steve, with their many gifts, remain among us) And they have departed, I believe, all with a more mature sense of themselves and their gifts for ministry.

This ministry of discernment and formation is an important ministry for us at St. John's. We call ourselves a teaching parish and that's what we mean: we help teach people to become ordained leaders, or to decide that they are not equipped for that particular role. We should, I think, be both proud of and grateful for this ministry of ours, and recognize our teaching function as a gift to the Church and to the world.

We also raise up extraordinary lay leaders. Think of our wardens, Tom Ward and Georgia Buck. Andrew, our faithful treasurer, Kate and Ellen who have run our church school and shepherded our children for so many years, and all the others who help to teach and form our children with a knowledge and love of God. John Cipolla, who has headed up the Parish School project with heroic dedication. Ken and the choir, who show up every Sunday and glorify our worship with song. The altar ministers and altar guild. The building committee, the finance committee, the parish life and pastoral care committees, the communications folk. And so many others – to start a list is to risk leaving someone out, and I apologize for any oversights. But we have leaders past, and present, and to come, and your ministries are in many ways more valuable and necessary than those of we ordained characters – I mean, without you, where would we all be? Where would the Church be? Nowhere, is the simple answer to that.

Next Sunday at the Annual Meeting we will recognize our vestry and wardens from 2007, and welcome those who will join that leadership team for 2008. They deserve our deepest praise and gratitude, our most joyful celebration.

I mentioned Doctor King at the beginning of this homily, and I want to return to him for a moment. Of course his name has been invoked frequently in the recent flap in the Democratic primary campaigns, as Hillary Clinton observed that “it took a President” to get Civil Rights legislation passed in the 1960's. In fact, it took both Dr. King's vision

and eloquence and organizing genius, and LBJ's canny and unrelenting political skill and power. Not only that, it took a grassroots movement of civil rights activists and ordinary citizens who yearned for justice. Individual brilliance and communal solidarity were required.

It's wasteful, as I think Hillary and Barack and many others have agreed, to champion one set of gifts and accomplishments over against another as we invoke and honor the achievements of the civil rights movement. Surely it is more fruitful to acknowledge and celebrate the combined contributions of so many many faithful believers in equality and justice, and at the same time to recognize the work undone and to put our collective shoulders to the wheel.

Similarly with our Christian callings. We are all called, we are all necessary. God and the Church need leaders, ordained and otherwise. And followers are needed too, or leaders have no function. God has formed and fashioned us for different ministries: *Some apostles, some prophets, some teachers, some workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.* Let us acknowledge and celebrate the combined contributions of so many many faithful believers, and at the same time recognize the work undone and to put our collective shoulders to the wheel.

We are all God's servants, and, as Isaiah promises, God will be glorified in us. Alleluia! Amen