Jesus and John

Matthew 3.13 "Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him."

The first Sunday after January 6th in the liturgical calendar of the Christian Church has traditionally been celebrated as The Baptism of our Lord. So, we move quickly from the two very different birth stories about Jesus to his adulthood now. And Jesus' public ministry thus begins here with his baptism by John in the River Jordan --- and that is without dispute. All four of the Gospels record Jesus' baptism by John

as the start of his active mission and public life. And whatever happened in the life of Jesus before his baptism by John is generally unknown or obscure or disputed. For apparently there was little interest in the first century of the Church about Jesus' earlier life. For this is where Jesus' story really began then, when he walked out into the wilderness and entered the waters of the River Jordan, before the throngs of people who followed John the Baptist and who lined the banks watching everything.

Thus, while this encounter between John the Baptist and Jesus is a crucial event in the life of Jesus, we really don't what actually happened there. For though the Baptism of Jesus is recorded in all four of our Gospels, they don't agree with each other in the details and are all written much by later Christian evangelists, by those who chose to follow Jesus, so we might need to take their accounts somewhat with a grain of salt.

Still, to judge by how much space the Gospel writers later assigned to this event, we can confirm that this episode was indeed crucial. And the Gospel writers devote a lot of that space to ushering John the Baptist quickly off the stage, or to emphasizing John's reported self-declarations of inferiority, such as when John said "I am not worthy to untie his sandal," (Mk. 1.7) or "This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man

who ranks before me'" (Jn. 1.30) or literally showing John passing the baton to Jesus, reportedly saying, "I need to be baptized by you, do you come to me?" (Mt. 3.14). Thus, these descriptions in the Gospels suggest to me, at least, that there were lingering conflicts between the followers of Jesus and those of John the Baptist, and lingering doubts about Jesus by the followers of John, and thus the need in the gospels then to promote Jesus over the Baptizer.

Remember, for instance, the story of John the Baptist in prison, which was our Gospel several weeks ago, where John the Baptist is dubious about Jesus, despite declarations in today's story of the heavens opening there at the river Jordan, despite the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus like a dove, and despite that voice from heaven declaring that this is God's son with whom God is well-pleased, despite all those signs and wonders, John the Baptist sends still messengers from his prison cell later to Jesus to ask whether he was indeed the one long awaited, or should they be looking for another.

Clearly, John had his own followers, and they were numerous and passionate about him as their leader. And Jesus had his followers too, no less numerous or less passionate, perhaps. This was a sort of clash between two religious Titans. The Jesus people prevailed in the end -- probably because they had the

better narrative, but there were apparently ongoing doubts and conflicts between these two religious parties. The book of Acts in chapter 19 records one of them, when some disciples of John were still debating with some disciples of Jesus about the adequacy of John's baptism, including Apollos, who was a disciple of Paul later in Corinth, all this occurring long after Jesus' death and resurrection.

This moment of truth in the River Jordan remembered in today's Reading is crucial then, but it is also very informative and very instructive to us even today, because it shows us how two powerful religious leaders can confront one another with grace. So, take a fresh look at today's Gospel story. Try to imagine what really happened there in the waters of the Jordan. While the crowds on the banks watched, two charismatic religious leaders actually met face to face, possibly for the first time, possibly for the only time in their lives, certainly for a moment of truth. Each, it appears, was prepared to yield to the other. Indeed Jesus came there to submit to John's baptism --- why Jesus needed to be baptized by John at all is a problem that Christians still struggle to explain today. John in return appears to grant some recognition and some authority to Jesus. So, both leaders here express deference to the other, and yield to the other, and give up any place of dominance to the other.

Can you imagine the outcome of the current Middle East peace negotiations if the Israeli government and the Palestinian Authority started by yielding to each other as Jesus and John did, rather than by rattling their sabers or making definitive political demands with preemptive conditions, as we all so often do in our various conflicts and confrontations, with little sign of humility or grace?

Each person in this encounter in today's Gospel respected the other. Each person also understood that what came next wasn't meant to be a power grab, a political or theological coup d'état, or a clinging to personal authority or privileged place, but was an earnest search by each for God's will in their lives and in the life of their community.

For those of us who take our inspiration from Jesus, it is very important to note here that Jesus did indeed come to John. Jesus didn't send some of his disciples on ahead to prepare the way, or to negotiate terms of engagement, or to arrange a photo op ------ In contrast, we Christians today, and especially we Episcopalians in this country, have spent much of the Christian era expecting the world to come to us. We imagine ourselves as the dominant culture and class, as "a chosen people among an elect nation," in the words of one of our recent Bishops. Imagine instead our taking the first step like Jesus, and not in

some kind of self-serving action, but as a simple act of humility and respect and love, like Jesus' washing the feet of his disciples later at the Last Supper and not 'lording' it over them as the Gentiles do. For alas, we Episcopalians are often thought to be looking down upon other Christians, and not acting with respect, or in humility.

Remember also Jesus left his home in Galilee to go meet John. Imagine our leaving behind the facilities which we allow to define us, these Gothic piles of stone that sometimes entrap us here, and going instead out into the streets where the crowds are, to other places less familiar, less grand, less prestigious, to act out our faith in the wild, in the real wilderness of life. Rather than putting out a sign that declares "All are Welcome" here, imagine if we went down into the streets of the Depot to engage with others there about Jesus, or into the market place, or into the homes of our friends and neighbors, or into the places of strangers and foreigners even. Jesus also left his identity on the riverbank -- all of his credentials that the Gospel writers sought to establish again and again in their careful retellings of this story. It is very likely that Jesus literally shed every garment he was wearing and went into the water as naked as any other pilgrim seeking baptism from John. Imagine what could happen if we set aside all

the beloved accoutrements that stoke our pride and magnify our purpose and define our status in society, and instead simply stood naked and vulnerable before one another, out in the streets of our community, in the manner of Jesus meeting John.

Even at a distance, this moment of truth in 30 C.E. should leave us gasping at how these two leaders met one another. Consider also John the Baptist, as much as we can discern from our one-sided accounts of his life, John began a messianic-like ministry to the people of Israel and prospered in it. He is better remembered in the historical records of the first century than Jesus was. John's ritual of baptism caught the popular imagination of his day and drew huge crowds from Jerusalem, Judea and all the countryside, we are told. Many, many people were convinced that John was the one they had long awaited. They crowded the riverbanks in anticipation of his next move. Kings were frightened of the power of his words, of what he would say next, or do next, which would later eventually lead him to be arrested and beheaded by Herod.

As the Jesus people told the story later, John saw immediately that Jesus was the one long awaited, and so he stepped aside. Whether or not that humble submission actually happened, the followers of Jesus clearly believed that the way to be a disciple of Jesus going forward was to follow Jesus'

example, was to yield to one another, to respect and love one another, to bend the knee, to leave our old lives behind, to assume the new garment of baptism, to let go of our former things, to sell all that we possessed even, to take on new identities, and to serve others, especially the widows and orphans and marginalized, and then also to confront the powers of our day in the public square demanding mercy and justice for all, like the Hebrew prophets.

The early followers of Jesus would soon enough get legalistic about such things. But at its first encounter, here in today's Gospel, the way of Jesus was yielding and vulnerable. Jesus becomes then our model of the liberated soul determined to live out God's way. He chose to submit to John's baptism. He humbled himself. When the Spirit of God anointed him as God's beloved son, he said 'Yes' and proceeded to live into that calling, whether others actually saw that affirmation or not. He carried out that calling in free and unexpected ways that baffled his own followers and enraged the religious establishment of his day. He responded to his environment – and was not controlled by it, and yet not aloof from it either. He chose to do the next right thing, rather than the conventional and easy thing. He chose to serve others, rather than himself. He chose to violate traditions that he considered hurtful to

people. He ate with sinners and tax-collectors, broke the Sabbath laws, challenged the scribes and Pharisees. Yes, he paid a price for acting so freely. So will we all, if we truly follow in his footsteps, but those footsteps begin here in the river Jordan, with John.

So, as we confront the powers that be in our lives in the days ahead, do we do so in the manner in which Jesus met John, or not? Amen.