

January 9, 2011

**The First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of Our Lord**

Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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**Godly Righteousness**

Among the presents I received this past Christmas was a remarkable book called *Citizens of London*<sup>1</sup> by Lynne Olson. It is subtitled *The Americans who stood with Britain in its Darkest, Finest Hour*. Ms Olson centers her account of the Second World War and the relationship between America and England on three men: John Gilbert Winant, the former Republican governor of New Hampshire who became the war time Ambassador to Britain; Edward R. Murrow, the great journalist and head of the fledgling CBS news in Europe; and Averell Harriman who ran Roosevelt's Lend-Lease program in London and became Ambassador to the Soviet Union, and then followed Winant in London.

Ms. Olson neither varnishes the truth, nor underestimates the importance of America's entry in to the war for its eventual outcome. She talks about the infighting, personality conflicts and strategic disagreements of major military leaders, the challenging and changing relationship of Churchill and Roosevelt and much else besides. It is a compelling history. But it is John Gilbert Winant, (about whom I knew the least,) who brings the book to mind this morning. By all accounts he had a capacity to connect in some way with what he might have called 'the common man.' He won the governorship of New Hampshire over the opposition of the powerful leaders of his own party and became one of the most popular governors of that (or any) state. He was subsequently appointed the first head of the Social Security Board, another program that was vehemently opposed by many in his own party but which he played a major part in bringing into being. During the war, as Ambassador, he was close personally to Churchill and played a pivotal role in a number of matters such as how American and English troops were going to relate to each other and the English population in general.

He was invited to help mediate a coal miner's strike during the war. In that, as in everything else, he kept the main goals of justice in mind, recognizing that at that time and place the moves toward what we now call a 'welfare state' were the way to go and that the miners were just as critical to the war effort as soldiers. In a famous speech he said "The drive for manpower in war must become a drive for employment to make freedom from want a living reality...We must always remember that it is the things of the spirit that in the end prevail. That caring counts...That by daring to live dangerously, we are learning to live generously. And that by believing in the inherent goodness of man, we my meet the call of

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<sup>1</sup> Lynne Olson, *Citizens of London* (Random House, 2010)

your great Prime Minister and 'stride forward into the unknown with growing confidence.'"<sup>2</sup>

Time and again he reminded anyone who would listen that war was not the goal for humanity, however necessary in order to resist tyranny. The point -- whether dealing with conflicting policy decisions, personal relationships, Anglo-American relations or whatever else -- the point is not enmity but greater justice and freedom for all people.

On of the things he had to confront was a sense of deliciously justifying righteousness on the part of many of those with whom he came in contact -- Roosevelt and Churchill included. The righteousness of the world is the kind we, see and experience all too often. It is that feeling that we are in the right, especially when we feel aggrieved, invaded, controlled, put down or a host of other possibilities. This kind of righteousness is the kind that we somehow believe gives us rights over and against others -- especially those who hurt us or those of whom we otherwise disapprove. We all know that feeling, that desire to be vindicated in the courts of human opinion, confident of the outcome. The resurrection into which we are baptized, however provides a new way of moving into 'right relation' or 'righteousness,' a new basis for human society that does not depend on scarcity and does not depend on having a common enemy, and does not pit some over against to others.<sup>3</sup>

Peter, was granted a vision of clean and unclean together, and afterwards says the words that we hear this morning: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does righteousness is acceptable to him." Jesus tells John the Baptist that he should be baptized "for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." He is echoing the prophet Isaiah who proclaimed "I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness" as he shares a vision of justice for the nations. This righteousness is the righteousness that recognizes that *my* well being, *my* salvation, *my* place in the world, *my* success and even the quality of *my* relationships are bound up with yours.

It is the righteousness of the world that put Jesus to death, and the righteousness of the resurrection, the Reign of God that is our own reasonable and holy hope for real life.

Today is, among other things, "Anglican Communion Sunday" and whether I am thinking about relationships within our church or within the wider Anglican Communion or whether instead I'm thinking about what this new congress can mean for us, or even if I am simply thinking about how we treat each other and whether we are being transparent, personal and straightforward with each other,

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<sup>2</sup> *Citizens* p.183-184

<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary <http://girardianlectionary.net/>

I know that I want to see reflected in our ways of being together, the righteousness of God rather than the righteousness of the world.

We who are gathered here represent a wide swath of political affiliation, policy preferences and the like. What I look for in myself and in everyone else is a fundamental concern for those without power, regardless of the policies that we believe will lead to a more just society. I dislike finding myself over and against 'those people' whoever 'they' are. And so I will support our leaders in church, state or anything else, who can convey what John Gilbert Winant was able to convey to so many: a sense of common purpose with an explicit concern for those who are weak, unemployed, marginalized in church and state, swept around like flotsam and jetsam on the wind and the waves of fate and fortune.

We are baptized into the righteousness of God which means that we must relate to one another with generous hearts and with an attitude of humility that knows however passionately we may feel about something, we just might be wrong. That is humility and is a mark of the righteousness of God. May it ever be so among us.

As always, let's respond to the gospel in a time of silence. Let us pray...