

## **Sunday after Theophany 2006: A.K.A. The Samurai Sermon**

Ephesians 4:7-13

Matthew 4:12-17

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Christ is among us!

Today we continue the theme of new beginnings. Last week, we considered how providential it is that the New Year coincides with the feast-day of the Lord's naming and Circumcision on the 8<sup>th</sup> day after His birth, the eighth symbolizing the first day of His new Creation. Today we celebrate the first Sunday after His Baptism in the river Jordan by John which we call Theophany, because through that event the God began to reveal Himself to the whole world in Christ, the mystery hidden from all ages and known only to a few since his birth. Often the Lord's baptism is marked especially because it is the beginning of His ministry, though today we read in the Gospel that it is only when He moved away from Nazareth that He began to preach. But as the word "Theophany" calls us to a deeper understanding, we can find even deeper meanings to this time in our Savior's earthly life. By beginning His Ministry He is also beginning already His passion, His suffering for us. As soon as He speaks the word "repent," He will be marked for death. But as soon as he says "the kingdom of heaven is at hand," He proclaims His Resurrection and His victory over death. Thus truly it is fulfilled what the prophet Isaiah said, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and upon those who sat in the region and shadow of death Light has dawned." And thus it continues to be a wonderful Providence, which is simply a "coincidence" which God provides, that as we begin this New Year we travel with the Lord through the Gospel into the beginning of His ministry, His passion, His victory.

Now before we travel onward into Capernaum, however, we should understand what came before. The Gospels tell us very little about the life of Jesus in Nazareth. Only Luke

recounts one incident when Christ was twelve, the rest of the Gospels are silent. We are told nothing about His life from the age of twelve to the age of thirty. Though in Luke He said he must be about His Father's business, that is the fulfilling of the Scripture, He also practiced the trade of his guardian Joseph the Betrothed, a carpenter. Now we must remember that God leaves nothing up to accident. Out of all the possible situations He chose to be born into the household of a carpenter. Certainly it makes sense metaphorically if we consider what His mission would be, to build up the kingdom of Heaven. But why not be a stone mason, or an engineer, or another trade?

Carpentry is not necessarily unique in its aspects but it certainly is distinct. To be successful as a builder one must know many skills. One must be able to use many tools. One must have a working knowledge of mathematics, geometry, and basic physics in order to even begin. One must be able to endure tests of the mind and of the body, tests of courage while high in the rafters and of patience while acting with precision. Carpentry engages all the faculties which we are given by God, enabling us to become like Him, our Creator and Designer. God only knows, yet in His choice He reveals to us something not only about Him and us.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the undefeated Samurai Miyamoto Musashi wrote the Book of Five Rings in which he sought to present what he had learned about the martial arts. In doing so, he likened the work of the master warrior to the work of the Master Carpenter. What he had to say can reveal very much to us how the Lord also works with, through, and in us:

When sorting out timber for building a house, that which is straight and free from knots and of good appearance can be used for front pillars. That which has some knots but is straight and strong can be used for rear pillars. That which is somewhat weak yet has no knots and looks good is variously used for door sills, lintels, doors, and screens. That which is knotted and crooked yet nevertheless strong is used thoughtfully in consideration of the strength of the various members of the house. Thus the house will last a long time. Even knotted, crooked, and weak timber can be made into scaffolding, and later used for

firewood. (Miyamoto Musashi. *The Book of Five Rings*. Trans. By Thomas Cleary, Shambhala Publications 2000. pg. 8)

Brothers and sisters, is this not what the Lord does in our lives? He takes what is best and strongest and most beautiful in us and brings it forward. He hides our iniquities, our knots, but even our weaknesses are put to use in the beautification of our souls. He grants that none of His gifts go to waste but that each of us is given the chance to become solid and whole and able to endure. As St. Paul says in today's epistle, "<sup>7</sup>But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ's gift." Even our biggest and worst mistakes, the things which we so fervently wish that we had never done, those things that make us want to kick ourselves for if we even just think about them, God uses even those crooked, knotted, and weak moments as scaffolding so that our souls may rise higher than they ever could without them. And when He is done using those bad things for building good, He mercifully does take them away and burn them, and the heat of His love for us warms the whole house of our spirit.

And that is not the only way in which the Lord is a Master Carpenter. Musashi continues his description:

As the Master Carpenter directs the journeymen, he knows their various levels of skill and gives them appropriate tasks. Some are assigned to the flooring, some to the doors and screens, some to the sills, lintels, and ceilings, and so on. He has the unskilled set out the floor joists, and gets those even less skilled to carve wedges. When the master carpenter exercises discernment in the assignment of jobs, the work progresses smoothly. (*Ibid.*)

This mirrors across 17 centuries and the side of the globe the words of the Apostle Paul, who also saw the Lord engaged in building:

<sup>11</sup>And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup>for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, (Eph. 4:11-13).

God directed His journeymen, who are the apostles, prophets, evangelists, who then imparted what they had learned to the pastors and teachers, who then used that knowledge to equip the saints, who in this context are you and me and everyone else in the Church, the laborers of various skills. We need to really understand what St. Paul is saying here. Our pastors and teachers are not the ones called to do the ministry for us. By their teaching and example and care they equip all of us for the work of ministry. The original Greek clarifies this: To equip the saints, from *katartismos* may also be translated as “to perfect the saints,” that is to be completely and perfectly furnished with the tools and supplies necessary for the job. The Ministry to which we are called is *diakonia* or “service,” and not just any service, but that of edifying or literally building up (*oikodomia*) just as a Master Carpenter builds a house, just as the body of Christ is built up, which is the Church.

So we may see that the Lord chose a very edifying trade in which to be brought up in Galilee. In a sense, it was the perfect training ground for His great work, the rebuilding of His beautiful Creation which had fallen into ruins. In this great work we each have our part so that in time “we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Eph. 4:13) As we begin this New Year, let us proceed then with the patience and prayerfulness of a spiritual carpenter, evaluating the timber of our souls, recognizing both our defects and our strengths, where we need to be straightened out and where we need to shore up our spiritual lives, looking to Him who is our master Carpenter, our Lord, and our Savior Jesus Christ, to whom belongs all glory, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, unto ages of ages. Amen.

*All Biblical quotations are from the New King James Bible. Thomas Nelson Publications, unless otherwise specified.*

*Copyright © 2006, Rev. Fr. David G. Subu.*