



ST PAUL'S ANGLICAN CATHEDRAL

MELBOURNE

SWORD AND ANVIL

Sword and Anvil

'Whosoever pulleth out this sword from this stone and anvil is the right-wise born King of all Britain.'

This legendary inscription (or something like it) was said to have been engraved on the blade of Caliburn – *Excalibur* – near to the point where the tang enters the hilt; the sword – again, according to legend – was held fast in an anvil in a stone in the yard of a church in London, and only the true-born heir to the throne would be able to draw it and be recognised as king. This king was to save Britain from making the descent into an accursed wasteland; was to return restore divine order where before there had been godless chaos; and would return (so it was said) to save Britain in the hour of her deadliest danger.

In the English-speaking world, at least, this wonderful confusion of Celtic myth with Medieval legend and late-Victorian romanticism – helped along by a cluster of authors and poets like Sir Thomas Malory, Alfred Lord Tennyson, and T.H. White – the Arthur legend is perhaps the best-known story about the public identification of a coming hero who himself has not a shred of knowledge about his true identity. Arthur's drawing the sword from the stone and anvil ('upon a New Year's day') declares him to be the one chosen by Providence; every other comer, no matter the motive, is a pretender. Arthur is declared to be both who he is, and who he must become.

The narratives describing Jesus's baptism by John in the Jordan River have not, for generations, excited either the interest or the study that they ought: beyond the narrow circles of scholars who have analysed them from various viewpoints, this short but important moment (related by Matthew in just five verses, after all), is often overlooked and neglected. Yet it is a story of declaration and identity and choice, and it is (not to put too fine a point on it) *vital*.

While there are gentle and likely legendary elements to it (the dove; the voice; and in Armenian Christian circles, a *dragon* in the water, waiting to devour the world), what it is *not* is a story about adoption: Jesus is not 'taken on' or 'adopted' as the Son of God, but publicly declared who he really is. His identity, his origin, his destiny must all await a final moment of declaration – the mighty acts, the prophetic insights, even the resurrection from the dead – still await a last, unambiguous, and argument-concluding singularity: this, according to the New Testament, is the 'promise of his coming', his appearing, his *parousia*.

The centrality of this moment of declaration and choice – *God's* choice, as it happens – is well attested across the three readings today.

Isaiah has God declare that the coming servant (the languishing exiles of Judah in Babylon, in the first instance) will be the one on whom the spirit of God will rest, and through whom it will be active: this one, in whom God's very essence (God's 'soul') is said to delight, will have as his primary task the establishing of justice – God's justice – in the earth. The bringing of light to the benighted nations; the opening of the eyes of the blind (figuratively and literally); and the freeing of prisoners: these are secondary effects arising from the bringing of justice. ('Justice', then, is clearly not some 'trendy lefty', tofu-eating, stringbag-carrying vogue from the 1960s: it is of the very essence of God's desire for the material world.)

Important, then, that the one of God's choosing be clearly identified.

In Peter's partly self-justifying speech to the ex-centurion Cornelius and his household at Caesarea-by-the-Sea (after all, he had to explain *to himself* as much as to his bemused non-kosher Gentile hosts why he, Peter, good Jew who by his own account had 'never eaten anything that is profane or unclean', was in the midst of uncleanness): in this self-justifying moment, so rudely cut off by all accounts by the Holy Spirit who seemed to tire of Peter's long-windedness and simply got on with a reprise of Pentecost, Peter declared that Jesus 'is the one ordained by

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God as judge of the living and the dead'. This little tag is often glossed over in favour of the 'God shows no partiality' truth that has dawned on Peter as an individual, but it is likely that there can be no more pivotal truth than this one. If this is so, then the identification and declaration of Jesus at his baptism – and then in his crucifixion, and then at his resurrection – is vital. If Jesus really is the one 'ordained by God' (and the verb really is *very* strong here: 'destined', 'appointed with precision' begin the capture the sense), then he cannot be ignored except at the gravest peril, no matter how you imagine it.

Matthew's economical little narrative, which has John the Baptist recoil in horror at the thought of Jesus' being identified utterly and thoroughly with the writhing masses – which included, let us not forget – the religious leadership collectively described as a wriggling brood of vipers: Matthew's narrative declares Jesus to be the point about which all things in God's world must now turn - 'This is my Son, the Beloved...'

Given Matthew's fondness for the prophet Isaiah, it is unlikely that he would have missed the point that God, according to that same prophet, does not share the uniqueness of his being with another: 'I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other'. If this is so, then Matthew is urging upon us a fresh look at this Jesus, who *does* share in this divine glory and uniqueness, and who therefore must be regarded as somehow sharing in the very substance of God. (Matthew's gospel turns everybody's idea of God on its head in the all but last verse of the last chapter: his declaration ought to send us all running back to the beginning for a moment of re-assessment.)

The world's current religious and political climate is such that we have had more than enough of the excesses of both: whether the shape-shifting forms of far-Left or far-Right politics, both of which descend into totalitarianism of one sort or another; or whether the claims and demands of this or that religious *-ism*, we barely have the stomach for anything more that requires a recognition of, and response to, uniqueness.

Hence, the grand-bland-ism of appeasement and disengagement that characterises contemporary expressions of faith in the public arena; or the withdrawal into private and inward spaces in which faith can be held without the possibility of offence to others. Very few of us want to be associated with the fire-and-sword crusading or explosive belt-wearing extremes of the major world faiths – and rightly so. But the question of truth – of what is true – is not thereby made redundant; indeed, it is made the more important, the more urgent.

All the more important, then, to rightly identify the one who is determined by God as the point around whom all things revolve; all the more vital to be confronted by the person of Jesus crucified and risen, and to ask how lives shaped faithfully and authentically on his will look and manifest themselves in a world which *does* carry swords and hurl bombs. All the more crucial, then, to know the one who is declared to be the Son of God at his baptism as he identifies utterly and to the end with sinners – and then to follow him, disavowing the trappings of power.

When King Arthur was dying, so legend has it, he ordered the last of his knights – Bedivere – to 'take Excalibur and fling him far into the middle mere'. When finally Bedivere could bring himself to cast the sword into the water on the third attempt, before it hit the surface, an arm (according to legend) 'clothed in white samite, mystic, wonderful', brandished it three times and drew it under the water.

What awaits us in the water now is not the power of a mystical sword, but the power of the crucified God, who has for ever and all identified with sinners. So let us participate in the one baptised as and for, us sinners.