

“THE HONOURS LIST”

A Sermon for the Baptism of Our Lord, January 10, 2016

Text: Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

What is the difference . . . between the New Year’s Honours List and the Baptism of Our Lord (and our own baptism)?

In case you are not familiar with the “New Year’s Honours List,” let me tell you a little about it. Having lived in the British Commonwealth fourteen years, I am quite aware that two times a year, at the new year and on the queen’s birthday, Her Majesty the Queen of England bestows honors on a wide range of people, in recognition of their service and achievement. A recent press release from the government begins as follows:

The New Year Honours Lists 2016, published today, recognise the achievements of a wide range of extraordinary people across the UK.

In addition to the honours recipients, this year sees 3 new admissions to the Order of Merit. The Order of Merit is awarded to those who have rendered exceptionally meritorious services towards the advancement of the arts, learning, literature and science. The award is in the personal gift of the Queen, and is limited to 24 living recipients.

The Queen has admitted Professor The Lord Darzi, for medicine, Professor Dame Ann Dowling for mechanical engineering and Sir James Dyson for his work in industrial design.

Recipients stretch from Cornwall, where Mrs Elizabeth Coot receives a British Empire Medal (BEM) for services to fundraising and to the community in Constantine, right up to the Orkney Islands where Mrs Marny Mowatt receives a BEM for her service to the Orkney Agricultural Show.

In total 1,196 people have received an award:

- 1,044 candidates have been selected at BEM, MBE and OBE level. 329 at BEM, 472 at MBE and 243 at OBE
- 76% of the recipients are people who have undertaken outstanding work in their communities either in a voluntary or paid capacity
- There are 578 successful women candidates in the list, representing 48% of the total
- 5.7% of the successful candidates come from ethnic minority backgrounds
- 7.5% of the successful candidates consider themselves to have a disability under the Equality Act 2010

So, how is the New Year's Honours List different from the Baptism of Our Lord? I think it is rather easy to see. They are similar in this: Queen Elizabeth (a voice from above) says to some of the great ones of the United Kingdom: "You are wonderful! I'm delighted with you"; and God (the voice from above) says to Jesus "You are wonderful! I'm delighted with you!"

The difference, however, is night and day. With the New Year's Honours List, her majesty waits until someone has deserved great praise and honor. With the Baptism of Our Lord, the Lord God waits for nothing, but initiates and inaugurates the wonderful works of Jesus by the power of his Word. When God says "You are beloved," that is what makes you beloved.

That is how it is with our own baptism, by the way. God doesn't wait for you to deserve membership in the Kingdom of God, the way Elizabeth II waits for you to deserve membership in the British Empire. With God, the last shall be first and the first shall be last.

You may have been biting your nails all December, waiting to see whether the Queen was going to invite you to tea and slap your shoulder with a sword and dub you "Sir" or "Lady," but you were certainly not waiting for God to decide about you. God decided about you way back when, and declared his verdict on you back at your baptism: "This is my beloved child, with whom I am pleased because he/she has been reconciled with me for the sake of my Son Jesus."

Proper theology always works in this way: the good things God does for us are the cause, and the good things we do are the effect.

Backward theology turns that around and pretends that the good things we do are the cause of the good things God will eventually do for us. If we are worthy.

Backward theology turns our relationship with God into the same kind of relationship we have with the world, which runs entirely on deserving. God in Christ works to turn that around.

Proper theology therefore gives glory to God, whereas backward theology gives glory to people—supposed really really good people. They get glory in the end, not because of what God has done but because of what they have done.

In proper theology, which is based on the gospel, all thanks and praise go to God; in backward theology, which is founded entirely on law, we praise ourselves and one another for our adherence to the law.

There is a hymn which makes this point, and I don't think it is familiar to most of you, based on a small sample I have taken. "All depends on our possessing God's free grace and constant blessing, though all earthly wealth depart."

Proper theology says “All depends on our possessing [already, because of what God has done for us already] God’s free grace and constant blessing.”

Backward theology says “All depends on our *deserving* God’s blessing.”

So, according to proper theology, our entire life is lived in thanksgiving to God; whereas, in backward theology, our entire life is lived in hopes of deserving the honor of God’s blessing.

I know that you are all bright people, capable of making many fine distinctions. You know the difference between a good car and a bad one, a good doctor and a bad one, a good lawn and a bad one, etc. You may make your living by knowing the difference between a good investment and a bad one.

So, I hope you will add this to the list of distinctions you are good at—and getting better at. You should know the difference between good theology and bad theology.

Proper theology always works forward, off of God’s goodness to us in creating, redeeming, and sanctifying us. Bad theology always works backward, always looking at ourselves and what we have done or are doing or propose to do, and then asking what we will eventually get from God in return. But the blessing of God is the cause of our goodness, not the effect of our goodness.

This is good news. And it begins for us when we receive, in addition to all the gifts of creation, the gift of forgiveness for mucking up creation—the world, the lives of other people, and our own lives. Jesus Christ **had** to be “stronger” than John the Baptist, in order to turn us around and get us going again.

This is the kingdom of God, to which we belong—a place where judgments are reversed so that people may be reversed and go in the same direction as the God of grace and mercy who created us to live, not to gratify ourselves, but to please God as we love and serve one another in harmony and peace.

I will have to wait for the Queen’s Birthday Honours List 2016 to see if I will finally be awarded a Medal of the British Empire, which I may then graciously decline due to my American citizenship. It may not happen. But meanwhile I will settle for something far better. I am baptized. I am baptized into Jesus. I am thereby a member of a commonwealth, an empire, a kingdom far greater than the British Empire ever was—the kingdom of God.

And that is an honor we share, all of us, with anyone who wants to have it. They can keep their honours. As Jesus said, “Whoever is least in the kingdom of God” is greater than the greatest person who was ever born of woman, John the Baptist.

That was good enough for Paul and Silas and Luke and the leper, and that is a list good enough for me. Amen.

