

BAPTISM OF THE LORD

(Both 2004 ; 0930 11/01/09)

Shortly before dawn on November 23, 1955, Russia exploded her first hydrogen bomb, vastly more powerful than the American bombs which had destroyed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

That night a celebration was held by the top Russian government officials, generals, and of course, scientists. The most important speech of the evening was that of Andre Sakharov, the young scientist who had made it all possible. To everybody's surprise and disappointment, Sakharov, instead of celebrating the achievement pleaded that his handiwork and that of his fellow scientists should never be exploded over any cities.

His plea was not well received, and he was gently but firmly reprimanded by his bosses. Nevertheless he became a national hero overnight and was showered with all sorts of special privileges, a colossal salary, luxury home, chauffeur driven car, and was awarded the coveted Stalin prize - he had become a member of the super elite of Russian society.

All this did however was to increase his unease about the bomb - what really worried him was the low moral values of those who controlled it, and one day he woke up realising that the abundance with which he had been showered was compromising what he knew to be the truth, that the bomb he had created was evil, and that he could play no further part in its development.

His decision was a form of baptism, a turning point in his life, just as Our Lord's baptism which we celebrate today, was a turning point in his, for up to that time Jesus had been doing the unspectacular work of a village carpenter, even though the seed of his Father's call had been growing in his pure soul. His baptism was a time of decision, he could either continue the quiet, peaceful, and happy life at Nazareth, or he could leave it all behind him. At the urging of the Spirit he decided that he could no longer go on with his former comfortable life.

Now Sakharov, as far as I know, was not a Christian, but he was a most Christ-like man, for he never wavered from that decision he made back in the 1950s. His decision was his baptism, which helps us to understand the meaning for Jesus of his.

Sakharov decided to be a fierce enemy of the bomb he had created and to campaign to have it banned, thereby shutting the door on what worldly people would call his career and future. Instead he chose to remain poor, insecure, and isolated as a consequence of his decision. He was of course cast out by the authorities, stripped of all his privileges, his phone was tapped, his wife was refused medical treatment when she became ill, and his family was hounded by the secret police. And then the final indignity, he was refused permission to go to Sweden to receive the Nobel Peace Prize which he had been awarded.

Such persecution he had to endure for thirty years. Like a child he had wandered away unprotected from his well-feathered nest, away from his own caste of people, the well-fed, corrupt, and unprincipled swarms of scientists who obeyed their political bosses without a murmur of protest - away from everything that was comfortable and

pleasurable to join the ranks of the outcasts and despised for, as he saw things, the only true way to make a name for himself was by serving others, rather than have privileges showered upon him in return for selling his soul to the State.

Whether he knew it or not, Sakharov in his decision to forsake everything comfortable, was following the example of Jesus after his baptism, which is why so many people see him as Christ-like.

Of Our Lord's baptism countless tomes have been written with different theories as to why he chose to be baptised, for after all he **was** the only ever sinless one, and the essential call of John the Baptist to those to be baptised was 'Metanoia', the Greek word for repentance - but many would ask, of what did the only ever sinless one need to repent? For me, the most satisfactory explanation ever offered is that he chose to be baptised as an act of self-identification with us, the sinners of this world.

Huge crowds had gathered at the River Jordan to listen to John and to be baptised in readiness for the new age which John insisted was about to dawn - insisting at the same time, however, that he was no more than the forerunner of one mightier than he, whose sandals he was not worthy to unloose. And when he saw Jesus coming with the others for baptism he immediately recognised him for whom he was, and shouted those wonderful words which we still use today in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist: **"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."**

It was a crucial encounter between the New Testament and the Old, Jesus the inaugurator of a new dispensation of redemption superseding the old law of Moses, of which John the Baptist was the last in a long line of priests and prophets. John realized that the old Law was passing away, and that his role, of proclaiming the imminent arrival of the new, was finished, Accordingly, recognising Jesus for whom he was, he at first declines to baptise him, but Jesus insists that his incarnation, his identification with humanity, cannot be complete without it - just as he later knew that total identification would also require his death.

Jesus baptism then was the beginning of his ministry, affirmed at that time when the heavens opened and his Father's voice proclaimed: **"This is my beloved son, listen to Him"**. Now Jesus' only concern is to go about his Father's business.

He as the Messiah had been proclaimed by John the Baptist, but a Messiah quite the opposite of what those who had most ardently awaited his arrival had hoped for - not riding clouds of glory, but a donkey, a borrowed donkey; not breathing fire upon Israel's enemies, but calling for people to love one another; not restoring a Jewish throne, but scorning all thrones, save only that of God his Father.

And so it was that he was baptised by John, and he the sinless one set out, turning his back on his comfortable life and setting forth to do the will of his father as his messenger of mercy to all his brothers and sisters.

He was now like all true prophets a man without honour in his own land, an example which Andre Sakharov nearly twenty centuries later was to emulate as he too turned his

back on his comfortable world of luxury living and public acclaim to be a prophet in his time by denouncing the evil of the bomb which he had helped to create. Sakharov may not have consciously emulated Jesus' example but there can be no doubt that it was a response to the urging of the same Holy Spirit of God.

In every day and age these Christ-like prophets appear, one has only to think, as another example in the 20th century, of Mahatma Gandhi who like Sakharov was not a Christian, but who, nevertheless, revered the teachings of Christ, and who when offered the position of first president of the newly independent India, for which independence he had devoted his life's work, declined, saying **"my work is finished, you must find yourself another president."**

And so Jesus set forth after his baptism as the supreme example for others throughout history to follow, seeking out all who were lost, healing all those who were broken and crushed, concerning himself only with the needs of others and never counting the personal cost.

But he set forth with his Father's affirmation ringing in his ears: **"You are my beloved son"**, and how important that was for one of the deepest needs of the human heart is to be appreciated for we all need someone who will help us to unfold, someone who believes in us, someone who will help us to be ourselves, someone who can see the hidden self in us that is afraid perhaps to come out into the open.

That unfolding happened for Jesus at his baptism, his love for God and his fellow man which had been simmering for years, now boiled over, and his hidden qualities of care and love which had been growing quietly like wheat in a field, now matured and manifested themselves - now there could be no turning back.

Baptism then for Jesus was a turning point, but what about our own baptism? It may be compared to a seed which was planted in our then young hearts, programmed in time, and through care, to grow into Christ like living, just like Andre Sakharov. Inevitably it demands of us fundamental choices, whether to go our own way, the way of self promotion and worldly values, or the way of Christ, that is, living up to the dignity of being children of the same father, and considering as he did the welfare of others as important as our own.

Of course this choice may not come to us in one dramatic moment as with Jesus at his baptism, rather it may come to us as a series of little choices - and most of us looking back over our lives can see that we have known such moments, moments that have proved decisive turning points, and with a little reflection we can pinpoint those crossroads when we have had to make a fundamental choice.

At our baptism we received the same Holy Spirit of God as did Jesus, but that sacrament is only a beginning, it is like the planting of a seed which takes a lifetime to grow and ripen. But as that seed matures it will force us, like Andre Sakharov, to look at the direction of our lives and ask ourselves are we being true to the direction in which we were pointed at our baptism?