

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario
Sunday, January 8, 2017**

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Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Matthew 3:13-17

“What kind of Christ do you want?”

What kind of Christ do you want? Or maybe the question should be: what kind of Christ do you want to make him into? Those may be strange questions, but sometimes we do seem to want to turn him into something he is not.

Let me explain what I am getting at. One of the ways we express what we believe, not just about Christ, but about our faith in general, is through the hymns we sing. Unfortunately, without realising that we are doing it, some of our best-loved hymns make dreadful theological statements about the kind of Christ we want.

Example #1: Away in a manger, verse two: The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.

Example #2: Once in royal David's city, verse three, thankfully dropped from our current Book of Praise: And through all his wondrous childhood he would honour and obey, love and watch the lowly maiden, in whose gentle arms he lay: Christian children all must be mild, obedient, good as he.

Example #3, the worst of all, again, thankfully dropped from our current Book of Praise, but familiar to anyone around the same age as me who grew up with it: gentle Jesus, meek and mild, look upon a little child.

Think about it. “No crying he makes” only makes sense if we want to turn the Christ-child into some sort of super-baby. Which, if we believe that he became fully human, he was not.

“Mild, obedient, good as he” only makes sense if we want to turn him into some sort of Victorian role model for well-behaved children. But in the one story that survives of his childhood, the visit to the Temple when he was twelve, he ignored his parents, and wandered off alone. And when Mary found him, he rebuked her for not knowing that he must be about his father’s business.

And “gentle Jesus, meek and mild” makes absolutely no sense under any circumstances. He called the Pharisees a brood of vipers in Matthew 12:34. He called scribes and Pharisees hypocrites and whitewashed tombs, in Matthew 23:27. He drove dealers and money-changers out of the Temple, poured out their coins and overturned their tables in John 2:14-15. Whatever else he was, meek and mild he was not.

But so often that is exactly what we want to turn him into. It’s all part of falling into the theological trap of domesticating Christ and sanitizing the Gospel.

I know I have quoted the words of Mr Beaver before, from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. I am not going to apologize for doing so again, because I love them. When Mr Beaver is preparing Peter, Edmund, Susan and Lucy to meet Aslan, he tells them, “Aslan is a lion – the Lion, the great Lion.”

“Ooh,” said Susan. “I’d thought he was a man. Is he – quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.”

“Safe?” said Mr Beaver. “Who said anything about safe? Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.”

Not safe. But good. Not gentle, meek and mild. But good. Not some sort of super-baby. The Christ-child, God in human form.

Matthew tells the story of Jesus being baptized by John is a fairly quiet,

low-key way. In the first part of chapter 3, the picture that we see is rather different. John has burst onto the scene, calling people to *'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'* Matthew says that he is *the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, 'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."*

And he certainly looks the part: his appearance is wild, his clothing is bizarre, and his preaching is confrontational. He is the first to use the phrase that Jesus would later use about the Pharisees and Sadducees: you brood of vipers. He talks about axes lying at the root of trees, winnowing-forks being wielded, and chaff being burnt with unquenchable fire.

But he is much less antagonistic with his cousin when he comes to be baptized. In fact, he tries to get their roles reversed, so that Jesus would baptize him: *'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'* Matthew 3:14.

And Jesus replies, with quiet determination and clear strength of purpose, *'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness'* Matthew 3:15.

It takes courage to focus on fulfilling all righteousness. It takes courage to insist on doing the right thing, especially when it is not the popular thing or the obvious thing. It takes courage to fly in the face of public opinion or what is generally accepted as right and proper and true. It takes courage to be the first to stand up and speak out and do what no-one has done or expects to be done.

But that is what happened when Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. It was the start of a radically new way to fulfil all righteousness. The New English Bible renders Jesus' words this way: *we do well to conform in this way with all that God requires.* Which is how Jesus would go on to spend his life on earth – doing all that God

requires.

And the first thing he does is encourage John, as he would later encourage all his disciples and followers, to do the same: to do all that God requires. Not being served but serving. Sharing the Gospel, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, protecting the weak, welcoming the rejected, confronting the proud, healing the sick, befriending the lonely, reassuring the fearful, comforting the sad, sharing with the underprivileged, speaking up for the persecuted.

In his commentary on this passage in *Christian Century*, Robert Saler says that as Jesus begins his ministry,

He points toward the ways in which the Messiah comes — not to gather power, but to disperse it, to empower (a ministry that begins in the kenosis, the self-emptying, of the incarnation itself) — then continues through the scandal of the cross and moves with us into the present day, when the church seeks to stay faithful to its task of embodying Christ on earth.

Which means that the real question that we need to ask ourselves today is not “what kind of Christ do we want?”, but “what kind of followers can Christ make us into?”