

Sermon 18 February 2024 Why Baptism? Genesis 9.8-17, Mark 1.9-15

Our readings this morning are both watery – appropriate for the weather we’ve been having! Noah, emerging from the flood and Jesus being baptized before starting his ministry. Mark is the gospel we are following during this church year, with occasional visits to John. Mark isn’t a great one for flowing prose. His opening chapter contains no flannel. It’s more like a series of bullet points. So this morning we have heard a very condensed account of Jesus baptism, his temptations and the start of his earthly ministry. It forms part of what might be called a prologue to the gospel, a kind of taster of what lies ahead for Jesus. His going down under the water and rising up again anticipate his death and resurrection; the words he hears at his baptism anticipate his transfiguration; being cast out into the wilderness anticipates the hostility he will face, but also perhaps Gethsemane.

Moving to the font...

Baptism itself is like shorthand for the whole Christian journey. This modest piece of furniture when used for baptism encapsulates the whole gospel. Listen as I pray part of the prayer of consecration over the water.

*We thank you, Almighty God, for the gift of water
To sustain, refresh and cleanse all life.....
We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism.
In it we are buried with Christ in his death.
By it we share in his resurrection.
Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.....
Now sanctify this water that by the power of the Holy Spirit,
We may be cleansed from sin and born again.
Renewed in your image, may we walk by the light of faith
And continue forever in the risen life of Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Traditionally the font is near the entrance to the church because it’s through baptism that we become a member of the church, a part of Christ’s body. It’s also near the door because baptism commissions us to go out and live Christ like lives wherever God places us – in our homes, our friendships, our workplaces, school etc. We’re sent to announce, like Jesus, that there is good news and that it’s worth their turning around, changing direction even, in response.

I’d like us to imagine for a moment that someone close to us greets us excitedly and says, ‘I have some good news for you!’ Just picturing that now, what might be the good news that you would like to hear? I remember that for my Dad it would have been winning the pools. For me this week it would be someone saying that they could fix our leaky boiler. For others of us it might be a more global example – that there was a ceasefire in Gaza or that we might stop being so heavily reliant on fossil fuels. For Noah it would have been that the flood was receding and that every living thing on earth, not only human beings, was being lifted out of the waters of death and offered a fresh start. This of course resonates with baptism.

In baptism the good news is acted out. Whilst it doesn’t immediately fix my leaky boiler or stop the war in Gaza, it reminds me, as I imagine Jesus stepping into the water with what Mark refers to immediately before this as ‘the whole Judaeon countryside’, ie crowds of people – it reminds me that Jesus became one of us. He experienced the domestic hassles of life in Nazareth as well as the brutal violence of the Roman empire. He stepped down into our world

as he stepped down into and under the water. He is alongside us, whatever our circumstances, and perhaps especially where there is suffering.

Then climbing up out of the water and the spirit descending on him like a dove echoes the account of Noah. You may remember his sending out the dove more than once and the last time it didn't return – a sign that the flood was going down and that it had found somewhere to perch. So there is a hint here of a fresh world order as Jesus emerges, a new covenant being established.

It's comforting that Jesus is alongside us whatever our circumstances, that he understands. But is that enough? Not really. We need something much closer, which is where the Holy Spirit comes in. Notice what happens when the Holy Spirit falls on Jesus – he experiences a depth of relationship with God, a realization that he is God's Son, a beloved Son. There's an interior shift, if you like. Jesus is alongside us as we go through our daily routine, and, through the Holy Spirit, he also dwells within us so that we are gradually more rooted in the realization that we are God beloved son or daughter. We inherit that identity from him as we share in his death and resurrection- that going under the water and coming up again that we experience in baptism.

So, we are reborn, and into a new world order (the kingdom of God) and we are equipped by the Holy Spirit to live that out. It all sounds very grand. The possibility of being a Christian superhero is dangled before us. Christian celebrity, perhaps, perfection, even, presented to God without spot or wrinkle as it says in one of the epistles. (I must say I would find that very attractive!). But Jesus' baptism points to a deeper reality which is about dwelling fully in our ordinariness, in being fully human, fully present to whatever are our circumstances. He doesn't have a private baptism in a secluded corner of the Jordan. (unlike in the picture on the screen). He's there, among every kind of person, and in the temptations that follow he rejects the identity of superhero or wonder worker. He mixes with all kinds of people – the well off, educated Simon the Pharisee, a desperate mother of a sick child from a foreign country, Zacchaeus the collaborator and tax collector. In the same way he mixes with us, in all our variety. He welcomes our humanness by entering it himself. Our deepest calling is to be truly, fully human. From dust we come and to dust we return as we say in our Ash Wednesday service. It's all very ordinary, and yet to be human is to be truly remarkable because Jesus was human. And because of our relationship with him through baptism we too, are shot through with divinity. What does it mean to be human? Is a question being asked more and more as we adjust to the impact of ever more sophisticated artificial intelligence. Jesus offers a pattern of that full humanness; a humanness infused with Godself.

We sometimes hear someone say of another person. 'They're comfortable in their own skin'. That's what we're all invited to be through baptism – fully at home in our own skin as human beings, connecting with others, knowing we are beloved, relating to God as one who loves us and relating to our world as worthy of those kingdom values of compassion, justice, peace and forgiveness that Jesus is announcing when he emerges from his temptations in the wilderness.

Invitation As you leave church this morning splash some water from the font on to your forehead as reminder of baptism. Hear God call you by name as a beloved son or daughter. View the world through Jesus' eyes as you leave church this morning.

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