

## The Baptism of Christ 2021, Year B

Mark 1.1-12; Psalm 36; Titus 2.11-14, 3.4-7

Today the Church marks and celebrates the baptism of Jesus in the wilderness at the hands of John. Both Jesus and John soon acquire titles. John is known to this day as John the Baptist because he baptised with water and only with water as Mark the Evangelist reports. He did so by first proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is known as the Christ meaning that he Jesus is the Anointed One, the Messiah meaning as Mark makes clear by quoting the Prophet that he is the Promised One. Jesus' title is not a title given because of what he does, but rather because of who he is. Mark like the other evangelists affirms that Jesus is the Christ, but he like them goes a step further stating in the first sentence of his Gospel, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God..." To a Roman citizen of the age this would have been a provocation. Since at least the time of the emperor Augustus Roman Emperors claimed for themselves the title "divi filius" meaning son of God. Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit, because he is the Son of God and not a Roman impostor.

In a podcast I listened to on this passage there was some uncertainty about why John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. This uncertainty helped me to be clearer in my mind about what John's purpose is. It is one that we who are versed in the grammar of the Good News know intuitively. John is the one who prepares the way of the Lord for the tearing apart of the heavens, for the ripping open of the heavens as we read in today's gospel.

God is now on the move upsetting not only Jews, but also Greeks and Romans. Paul the Apostle captures something of this when he writes to the Church in Corinth who confessed Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God,

"... but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the

power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength."

The Good News that we proclaim is ultimately good news for all people, even though it will involve a reset. Sometimes it will be deeply upsetting to us. It will be painful. It will be costly. God is turned to the world in its entirety. This is what manifests itself in Jesus and is proclaimed year by year when we recall that a number of human beings, magi to be precise, set out leaving the comfort of their homes to follow a star that leads to a baby lying in a manger. The Tradition of the Church has embellished the narrative as Robert pointed out on the Feast of the Epiphany, but for the most part in good ways to my mind pointing to the universality of the message that we are called to make our own, live and then in turn make known. There is the tradition of the three kings representing the three ages of adult life and there is the tradition of the kings representing the three known continents at the time of Africa, Asia and Europe. Even the assigning of kingship, of sovereignty to the magi is theologically significant for as Jesus says in the Great Commission, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Christians acknowledge that all authority is of and given to Christ.

The good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God can only be fully grasped by immersing oneself in the narrative of the Bible and the Tradition of the Church, which the Church, you and me, is to share in and out of season generously without tiring. We recall that John is preparing the way. He is preparing the way for God's Promised One. This is what John tells us in Mark's Gospel, "I have baptized you with water; but he (God's Promised One) will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

John is calling the people to acknowledge their sin, their estrangement not only from a relationship with God, but also from God's ways. And we have painfully had to witness how people claiming a relationship with God have fallen: Ravi Zacharias, Jean Vanier, Carl Lenz and Jerry Falwell jr. Be warned of the Christian cult of the personality! With John the Baptist we point to Christ and Christ alone.

John is summoning the people to turn from their mistaken ways, their misguided ways, their collusion, their evil ways, their destructive ways in the sight of the living God. What is a little surprising is that people according to Mark respond to John's message. The people see their need for a better way that is God-oriented that is God-inclusive. Mark writes, "And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins."

This picture of people leaving their staid ways, confessing their sins should encourage us as we see ourselves as part of this movement from the city into the wilderness, but also because where we allow ourselves to become instruments of God people will respond. We can be preparers. We can share in John's ministry. People will respond.

New life in God always begins with an acknowledgement. Something is amiss in my life or something is missing. Something is amiss in the world or within society. An acknowledgement entails an act of the will, which is symbolised in a turning away from and a turning to. Pete Seeger, the folk song writer and social activist, wonderfully wove the call to repentance together with words from chapter 3 of the Book of Ecclesiastes in his song *Turn, turn, turn* first recorded in 1959.

To everything (turn, turn, turn)

There is a season (turn, turn, turn)

And a time to every purpose, under heaven.

John's ministry of baptism is a symbolic one. It is with water. It is not with the Holy Spirit. It is cult. It is ritual. It is effective, but it is not effective in the way that Jesus' ministry is. There is a qualitative difference. John's ministry into which he is called looks ahead to Jesus' appearing, and it is the appearing that makes the difference

as John testifies. It is at Jesus' baptism that the heavens are torn apart. In the words of the Prophet,

Behold, I am doing a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness  
and rivers in the desert. (Isaiah 43.9)

I said above that there was some uncertainty about why John preaches a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We must return to the Garden of Eden. We must return to Adam and Eve. There in the garden of gardens these two archetypes in their common humanity and in their companionship, given to one another to comfort one another, in their joint loneliness tragically together fall from grace. This falling from grace is accompanied by their banishment. You and I are Adam and Eve.

From time immemorial people have acknowledged their estrangement from God. From time immemorial people have sought to connect with God across the religions. From time immemorial they have acknowledged their need of God to live full lives often making reparations via a sacrificial system. These peoples for the most part did not have the language of sin and grace, but this language, this grammar has made its way into the vocabulary of every language under heaven. Turn, turn turn...

For God to act we must almost always first see our need of grace, or failing that initially, our need to be turned to God, open to what God will do. Ready to go out to him. To leave the city for the wilderness. To leave routines for the adventure of the new. And to be ready to be surprised. What will be the outcome? The outcome of being turned to God is a prayer, a line from the Lord's Prayer to be exact: "Your will be done", the opposite of "I did it my way". Jesus can ask this of us and of each one of us because this is at the heart of his own prayer life, as Mark recalls in

another garden, the Garden of Gethsemane There Jesus prayed, 'Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.' (Mark 14.36) Landscape, locus, gardens tell the story of our salvation.

Where God's will is done the heavens are torn open and once again God descends and says to his people who rise up and follow "With you I am well pleased!" or as the angel says to Mary, if you prefer, "Do not be afraid, you have found favour with God." For Mary this meant she would become God bearer, Theotokos and give birth to the Christchild and later be pierced to the heart as by a sword. For Jesus the divine acclamation at his baptism meant firstly that he was driven into the wilderness with the wild beasts and ultimately into the way of suffering and death to be for a fallen humanity enthroned on a cross, a spectacle for the whole world to see, such are the ways of God amongst humankind. These contrast markedly as we noted above with the acclamation of the Emperors of the Roman Empire, who proclaimed themselves to be divine, but of whom only human stories can be told.

Jesus saw the heavens torn apart. Do you see the heavens torn apart? God is on the move. God is to be encountered. People of God, Turn, turn, turn...