

Baptism of Jesus
11/1/2009

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

Sermon preached by Rev John Hudson

On the last Sunday of November 2008 we began the Season of Advent, culminating on Christmas day, with the birth of Jesus. We are now in the season of Epiphany, and, as Mark tells us, we are faced with a confronting declaration by the Father and the Spirit, that Jesus is the unique Son of God. Or to put it in a more secular way, on Christmas-day we receive and unwrap God's gift, and at Epiphany, (a sort of religious 'Boxing-day') we take another look at the gift, and try to decide if we want to keep it, or return it to the sender, with a polite "thanks, but no thanks"!

The Season of Epiphany, which we are now celebrating, began with Wise men from the East bearing gifts in acknowledgement of the infant King. They are Gentiles (outsiders) summoned to become witnesses that the new-born Messiah is Lord of and for all peoples and nations. Already at this early stage the significance of Christ's coming into the world has a profound effect upon Israel's understanding of her expectation and anticipation of what the Messiah would be and do! Likewise, the worldly powers, through the Roman Emperor's representative, Herod, anticipate a threat to their strangle-hold on the world, and act accordingly; hence, his order causing "The Massacre of the Innocents", the death of children, to justify the maintenance of law and order. Look at the pages of our newspapers over the last week to see how the innocent suffer, and how it is justified by both sides in the pursuit of peace and reconciliation. And how a "coalition of the willing" used the same reasoning to devastate a country that gave birth to Abraham, the spiritual father of Israel, Islam and Christianity. How confronting to those of old, and us today, for God's gift, this Son of God, to say "...love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:44). "Impractical, if not impossible" we say, "but as a general principle, a universal truth to seek after, Jesus has spoken with great wisdom". These are not words spoken by a sage, however worthy and wise, but the "WORD of God Himself, who, as we see in Mark's account of Jesus' baptism, unites word and action in a very particular way in that he is already living out the word he speaks, which fore-shadows his suffering and death for friend and foe alike. Jesus knows that here at the start of his ministry, his baptism by John is a baptism into his death, a baptismal death that will ensure repentance, forgiveness, and the gift of God's Holy Spirit, not for his own sake, but for yours and mine, and indeed, for the whole world.

If someone was to tell you that your Baptism was more important than your Birth, you would be entitled to think that he was speaking nonsense. For you have to first exist, be born, be alive for something of greater or lesser importance to happen to you. But John Calvin of Reformation fame in the 16th Century makes just this point in his Catechism; as does the famous 20th Century Theologian, Karl Barth, in his Church Dogmatics. These 'Doctors of the Church' are making the point that we are made first, in the Image of the Son of God, whereby we gain our true identity, and only after that do we become what we and others recognize as persons. We all celebrate a Birthday, but seldom, if ever do we remember our Baptism, the primary establishment of who we are 'in Christ'. These Doctors of the Church are doing nothing more than Mark does when he links the Baptism of Jesus, the commencement of His mission, with our discipleship in the 'Body of Christ'.

Today's reading of the opening verses of the book of Genesis, has nothing to do with how God made the world, in the popular sense of such belief, and everything to do with how 'the Maker of Heaven and Earth', has formed within the substance of His creation, a love for all His creatures and how He provides and works for their redemption.

In Genesis, as the Spirit broods over the face of the waters, God says "Let there be Light" and "God saw that the Light was Good. In Mark, as Jesus comes up out of the waters of Baptism, 'He sees the Heavens torn apart, and the Spirit, like a dove descending upon Him, and a voice from heaven saying, "You are my Son the Beloved; with You I am well pleased". Lest anyone think that belief in the Holy Trinity, God as Father Son and Holy Spirit was a corrupt contrivance by Paul and the Early Church Fathers, (as some UCA "celebrities" seem to) then look at the prominence given to such an important doctrine by the writer of the 1st Gospel, the one that formed the basis of both Matthew and Luke's Gospel. See how it comes to us not as an obscure theory, but as living, active, loving expression of God's nature, for us and for all creation. So the church was confronted by what it could not explain but could only respond to in awe and worship.

Again, a deliberate and abrupt assault is made upon our worldly sensibilities and cherished convictions, when we are engaged by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Why? Because it is of our nature to think that it is for us to give meaning to the making of the universe and the significance to our own existence. God therefore, becomes nothing more than a 'value-added' component to the whole scheme, ourselves being the "creator, redeemer and sanctifier" of all we survey. In other words, we create our own world, we correct our own mistakes, and we determine what is right and wrong. In Genesis we learn that from the beginning it is this kind of world that God has worked to save us from. The witness of John the Baptist is the fulfilment of one covenant God has with His Chosen People, and through them, to the world; and with the coming of Jesus of Nazareth, announced by John, it is, as Mark says, "the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God". Here the "beginning" in Genesis and the "beginning" in Mark, and even more emphatically, the "beginning" in John's gospel, all point to a New Covenant through which we see the face God in Jesus Christ.

So, our beginning and our continuing and our concluding, is confirmed and assured by our baptism into the life, death, and resurrection of Him who is the Alpha and Omega, the real and only Beginning and End of all things. It not our own face, our own personality or our own accomplishments that makes this possible, for in Baptism in looking into the face of Jesus Christ we face the death he calls us to. As we have frequently heard in our study of Bonheoffer's writings from his death-cell in a concentration-camp, "when Jesus calls a man he bids him come and die". This, as Bonheoffer well knew, was the only way to discipleship. Turning our face toward his means following him even as he turns his face toward Jerusalem, for in that seemingly foolish decision (for that's what his own disciples believed) will be his death on the cross, but in so doing he will have died our death for us.

His baptism was the beginning of his calling as the Son of God. Our baptism is the beginning of our calling given to us, St. Paul says, by the God, who said "Let light shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2.Cor.4:6).

Let the verse of a hymn by Frederick Green have the last word:

Christ is the world's life, he and none other;
Born in our darkness, he became our brother.
If we have seen him, we have seen the Father:

Glory to God on high.

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