

Epiphany 1
11/1/2015

Mark the Evangelist

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

One Baptism in Christ

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Robert Gribben

This morning we have heard the baptism of Jesus proclaimed in two starkly different ways, Mark's and Luke's. In Acts we hear about the distinction between the baptism of John and the baptism which Jesus will bring. In his *gospel* you could be forgiven for thinking Luke did not know Jesus himself was baptized by John (3:21-22) but clearly by the time he wrote his History of the Church, it was a controversial matter. Matthew thinks so too, and tries to explain why Jesus the Messiah needed to be baptized at all.

But this morning we read from Mark, our patron. Since he didn't write a second volume, this was his only chance to say anything about baptism - Jesus' and the church's and he runs them together. The disciples in Ephesus must have been cut off very early from the 'Jesus movement' since they practised only the baptism of John, which, as Luke points out (following Mark) was '*for repentance and the forgiveness of sins*'. The baptism of Jesus, and baptism following Jesus, was of another character. It added fire to the water. It added the Holy Spirit. So in Acts, the apostles fixed the matter up by gathering the Ephesians into the baptism of Jesus - and they indeed received the one thing wanting.

Our lection this morning divides into two: the story about John, and the second about Jesus. 'John the Baptizer' (says NRSV) - not the Baptist (he might have been a Methodist); nor is he the patron saint of actual Baptists, who believe in *Jesus'* baptism, not John's. They may insist on adult candidates, but they are not continuing John's ministry. And all churches need to take the baptism of adults more seriously.

John the baptizer, Mark writes, '*appeared* in the wilderness'. This is the first statement after his introduction: 'The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God', a rather dramatic start. His first readers would immediately have recognized in John that strange prophet Elijah, though he is not mentioned by name. Elijah himself pointed towards a *coming* Messiah. John points forward to one who is coming, who is greater than he. As for the rest, it is lively characterisation: it is not necessary for Baptists to wear uncomfortable clothing, nor to follow the diet of nomads. In fact it is not necessary to follow John the Baptist at all. This whole Gospel glimpse is *anticipatory*.

But John does explain what he intended. He appeared 'proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins', and says 'I have baptized you with water', but the one to come 'will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.' By Luke's time (perhaps because the infant church was already pulling away from its parent Judaism) the distinction had become a major one - but I don't think that's how *Mark* intended it. I think he saw the two half-stories as connected: John's and Jesus'. In the church which Jesus founded as a necessary part of his movement, baptism would become associated with repentance, water and the Spirit's fire. That is, what John was doing was a *foundation* on which Jesus would build (not replace).

But then we need to look closely at what John's '*baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins*' meant. 'Repentance' is one of those words whose meaning has been diminished. It has little to do with being miserable about your sins, and everything about doing something about your life's direction. Its fundamental meaning is 'change'. But precisely not on your own, by your own effort. This is not 'self-help'. By baptism we become 'in Christ', St Paul's favourite phrase. And as we consider our lives in Christ, we repent: we begin afresh to walk in his Way enabled by the Spirit.

But John runs all this together: a 'baptism-of-repentance-for-the-forgiveness-of-sins'; 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*'. Repentance, this change of national (!) direction, is for John, a gift of God, not a human effort. Whatever else the Baptizer was doing, he was performing a sacrament of God's grace. And there was more grace to come, as the Jewish people once again passed through the waters of Jordan, from the desert to the land flowing with milk and honey. And that was the *beginning* of the Good News of Jesus Christ the Son of God. The baptism of Jesus had begun.

Twenty centuries have passed since then. And we have inherited these two accounts, Mark's wonderful unitive depiction of the baptism of John's and Jesus, and Luke's distinction, perhaps a pastoral measure in the mess that was the church in its earliest years. Those Ephesian disciples were a simple case; others were more complicated - like those who received the Spirit *before* baptism in water. We have carried *that* tale too down the centuries.

That we *have*, is a sign of the central significance of the Scriptures for those who are disciples of Jesus. These early narratives, letters and homilies are our foundational reference books. When we lose our way, they help bring the Church back to the Way. Their interpretation is, however, a necessarily human task, and our inadequacy shows. In our theological colleges and universities, we try to give students the tools of languages, the history of thought and culture, and the sadder history of argument and dispute which, when mixed with civil power, leads to war and division - and what we now call denominations. In our century we have more denominations than ever, and their number is growing.

But we have also discovered the gift of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. One of its greatest exemplars was the late Pope (now saint), John Paul II. His whole ministry was marked by apology - to the Jews, to the Christian Orthodox, to the churches of the Reformation, to the Anabaptists, to all whom the Church of Rome had sinned against - and he initiated major steps towards reparation of relationships. Pope Francis is carrying it further; almost everything he does is an act of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. A great deal of the present ecumenical movement is in the same spirit.

It is also a fact about our times that the forms of Christianity growing most rapidly are those who tend to read the Scriptures more literally, and who have read Mark in the light of Luke, that is, they draw the distinction, in varying degrees, between baptism in water and baptism in the Holy Spirit, and they are not concerned about order. They then conclude, as the first Baptists did in the 16th century, that baptism in water is *insufficient* and Holy Spirit baptism *essential* to being a Christian, and they have varying lists as to what authenticates baptism in the Spirit, some of them also drawn from Luke. They are no more wrong about this than Luke himself, and he's in the New Testament! And they seem to be making progress in converting citizens of this naughty world to Christ.

Our churches' traditions have also narrowed the biblical definitions. Lutherans and Reformed Christians in Switzerland and elsewhere drowned 'Anabaptists' (meaning re-baptizers, for they baptized people who had been baptized as infants), using their civil powers. In the last few years, the Lutherans have formally apologized.

By the time these divisions arrived in the 20th C, Protestants divided into one family who baptized *only adults*, and another who *effectively baptized only infants*. The latter was never our position; it is simply that we have never taken adult baptism seriously. And given the number of babies *not* brought to baptism these days in Australia, there is a vast harvest out there which is not reflected in our current yield. This neglect suggests that we barely take baptism seriously at all. That may not be our particular fault - my generation was brought up this way - but we are in an ecumenical and evangelical era *when we could do something about it*.

What is happening in world Christianity through so-called evangelical and pentecostal groups should call us to repentance, that is, to change our ways - not to exclude the baptism of the children of believing adults (which I entirely support), but to face up to our missional failure. The loss of baptism from our ordinary church life is yet another example, that we believe (not least in the Uniting Church) that the Christian faith is best promoted by avoiding anything which makes Christianity look different from the western civilisation our successive governments are so determined to promote and preserve. We allowed baptism to become mere social custom; we domesticated its ritual to what George Yule called 'moistening them into the kingdom'. I am aware that what I have said will be challenging to those, who like me, were brought up in a particular denominational tradition. We were never asked to value our baptism.

If people leave the church after a baptism without having been profoundly moved, and affirmed in their fundamental commitment to Christ, we have failed. In regard to this particular congregation, we have long done these things well: I speak to strength our arm!

It seems strange to do so - but if we listened to the churches beyond our own (ones we are suspicious of), we might begin to understand, and if we claimed our baptism afresh as a reality in our lives, as I will invite you to do in a moment,¹ we may discover a hidden power to change and renew us in the faith.

In the stories of Jesus' baptism, we see an epiphany, a second epiphany - of Jesus as he truly is. 'You are my beloved Son; in you I take delight', according to Mark - a message which at the baptism only Jesus hears. But at the end of his Gospel, in the Passion which is Jesus ultimate baptism (10:38), the centurion proclaims it, and so must we.

¹ The service included a Congregational Reaffirmation of Baptism (*Uniting in Worship* 2).