

Advent 3
13/12/2015

Mark the Evangelist

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Isaiah 12:2-6

Luke 3:7-18

Becoming one of God

With John the Baptist we have the return of the prophet. John's preaching is striking in its focus on the coming judgement. We hear of the "the wrath to come", that "the axe is lying at the root of the trees", and that "what doesn't bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire." We hear of one who is yet to come, who also carries a "winnowing fork" to clear the threshing floor and toss the chaff into unquenchable fire" – not quite gentle Jesus, meek and mild! John's baptism is a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". "Get ready" is his message. The nervous "brood of vipers" who've come out to hear him are left to ask, "What then should we do?" The response is profoundly social and ethical: share, be fair, do not abuse your power.

Finally, we hear that, "with many other exhortations, John proclaimed the good news to the people." This is strange good news: the light at the end of the tunnel is the headlamp of an oncoming train! The only good we might find in this is that we've been warned to back on out of the tunnel, if indeed it is possible to outrun God.

With his preaching of his social ethic, John stands directly in line with the prophets of old. Yet, in the midst of all that, almost hidden and easily skipped over, we hear a contrast which John draws between himself and Jesus (who is to follow him): "I baptise with water; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit [and fire]." Preaching the pouring out of God's Spirit is also in line with the preaching of the prophets (cf. Joel 2.2). And it is, in fact, here that we are met with the good news John proclaims: not the calls for repentance and the exhortations, but that one is coming who will pour out the Spirit.

Yet, in the midst of the approaching doom in John's preaching the proclaimed coming of the Spirit scarcely draws our attention. This partly because we're distracted by the fire and smoke of the apocalypse, but also because it is not quite clear what talk about the outpouring of the Spirit refers to or will **bring about**.

There is something very appealing, direct and tangible about the ethic John preaches: share, be fair, do not abuse your power. We understand this, and we understand it without reference to any spirituality or outpoured Spirit.

Here we are on the edge of the familiar reduction of Christian faith to ethics. If I criticise that reduction here, it is not to diminish the importance of the kind of behaviour John calls for. But the fact is that we don't need any a particular spirituality to understand him; the sense of justice in what John preaches has a social and political universality about it, even if it is not applied. To shift the force of Christian confession to ethics is largely to render the specific character of Christian faith redundant.

We really have only ourselves to thank – or to blame – for this. And, perhaps surprisingly, the seeds for the problem are in the way we *try* to be Christian in our talk about God. Central to Christian-speak is the relationship, "Jesus and God". This is usually considered without much reference to the Holy Spirit, although we do know to toss the Spirit in somewhere for completeness.

The problem here is that God as an *idea* is *already* spirit, so that “Jesus and God” is already “Jesus and the Spirit” The result of this is that we end up talking about Jesus’ *relationship* to “Spirit” in a general sense. We can then quickly make the move to conclude that Jesus had a relationship to (the) Spirit, and we can too; Jesus is the one who shows us how. Christmas becomes the advent of the great spiritual teacher. (Those who read Marcus Borg’s book with the discussion groups earlier in the year will recall that this is the approach that he takes).

But, scripturally, it’s a bit odd to speak of Jesus having a “relationship” to the Holy Spirit. Rather, Jesus relates to the Spirit in the same kind of way as we relate to our breathing. If there is no breathing, there is no us; but we don’t “relate” to our breathing. In the same way: no Spirit, no Jesus; yet Jesus does not so much *relate to* the Spirit as live *by* it. Luke sees this from the very beginning, and so Mary hears: “the Holy Spirit will come upon you...”, and she will conceive. Taking the lead from Mark’s gospel, Luke marks the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry with the descent of the Spirit on Jesus at his baptism, *making* him what Jesus is called to be. (Even more clearly in Mark is it implied that the good thing in the approach of Jesus is that he baptises with the Spirit). And, again and again, we hear in Luke (and Acts) that it is “filled with the Spirit” that Jesus (or the church) does this or that remarkable thing.

It is the Spirit who “*makes*” the Son the Son of the Father; in the same way, it is the Spirit which makes the Son Jesus, one of us. Yet this is not the good news John proclaims. He announces that Jesus *gives* the Spirit. This opens the door to an odd thought. If, by the Spirit, the Son is made “one of us” then, by the gift of the Spirit Jesus then delivers to us, we become “one of God”.

The grammar is clumsy but the point is important. It might seem neater to declare that God becomes one *with* us and so we one *with* God; but this doesn’t take us as far as our being one “of” God. When God’s gift of the Spirit is given, the Body of Christ is founded – in the first instance the body of Jesus himself. “Christ’s body” first takes form as Jesus of Nazareth, completely human and completely the presence of God through Jesus’ presence in the Spirit. But the body of Christ is subsequently that communal Body which is created when Jesus sends this same Spirit upon his followers. The baptism of the Spirit is the gift of God which makes of this human reality here and now, the Body of Christ – humanity in the same mould as Jesus himself. The effect of the Spirit is the creation of a human community in which the relationship the Son enjoys with the Father is known among and between human beings, and between us and God. For Jesus to be incarnate is not for God to become different, but for the world to become different. We are demonstrated – revealed, we might even say “apocalypsed” – to be destined to be drawn into God’s own life *even as* we are made more human.

That Jesus baptises with the Holy Spirit is the good news in John’s preaching because this makes possible our knowing ourselves destined to become more than we yet are – indeed to become our true selves. Such perfection in us is only ever momentary, for the Spirit never becomes our possession; the wind blows where it will, and so also the Spirit. Indeed, we should say that true humanity is a very rare event. For the most part the church is, like everyone else, far from perfect. It is distinct from the world only in that it acts out a drama which points forward to a coming fulfilment of God’s promise. This action takes place in the liturgy of our worship and in those kinds of ethical actions which John throws before us – to share, to be fair, not to abuse. The gift of the Spirit is God’s answer to God’s own call to take up that kind of work. We are to answer John call to live for others with the same enthusiasm as we await the gift of God’s Spirit.

While it might seem totally out of season for the church today to be crying out “Come, holy Spirit” this is the word for Advent, for the Christ who came is what we shall be because he gives us this Spirit, that we might be transformed to bear his likeness, his humanity.

In this way do God’s people, in the words of Isaiah, draw up water from the springs of salvation (Isaiah 12.3), leaping up to life in all its fullness.
