

**Epiphany 1**  
**10/1/2016**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Acts 8:14-17**

**Psalm 29**

**Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

## **The Baptism of Christ**

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Robert Gribben

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Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened... Luke 3:21

You don't learn much about today's theme by reading Luke. Our biblical ancestors did not have the privilege of the media nearby, no paparazzi on Jordan's bank. Liturgists have no idea whether John baptized Jesus standing up (one or both of them), by immersion or submersion, and whether he used any words. As a matter of fact, reading Luke, you will not even discover that it was John who baptized him. Before the first sentence is finished, the subject matter has shifted to something which could not have been photographed.

It is difficult for us to imagine how 1st century Jews felt about heaven opening. The heaven was not supposed to open because divine power was kept on its upside, and that secured mortals from its danger. But such barriers are not important for the communicating God of the Scriptures.

The heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

In John's Gospel there is no description of the baptism at all, but the whole ministry of John the Baptizer turns on that divine revelation. The evangelist John wrote,

The One who sent me to baptize with water said to me, '*He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain* is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God' [Jn 1: 32-4, my italics]

An epiphany indeed. The curtain has risen on all that is to follow of the Good News of God in Christ, revealed in history, in the life, passion and death of Jesus, and in his rising, through the witness of the Spirit. It is Matthew who summarizes its importance at the end of his Gospel, indicating that all who wish to follow Christ, must, like him, step down into the waters of baptism. Jesus's commission to the waiting disciples after the resurrection is, Go and make disciples, baptizing and teaching them all that he had taught them.

Our reading today from the Acts of the Apostles tells us that the apostles indeed acted on the commandment, but not all got either the baptizing or the teaching right. So we heard that the apostles Peter and John found a group of Samaritan followers of Jesus, who had been baptized 'in the name of Jesus' but without any declaration by or of the Spirit. Well, the apostles by prayer and the laying-on of hands bestowed on them the gift of the Holy Spirit, completing their initiation into the church. The Acts tells of other such untidiness in the earliest church, and of the apostles' ministry of correcting and completing what had happened in the first raw days of evangelism. And without such

apostolic tidying up, the Christian church may not have survived a generation. That is still the task of theologians, but we need to know that the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church which has survived to our day did get a number of things wrong, even then; and it has continued to do so spectacularly through its long history, and it is a considerable mess now - including our own effort at being a faithful Church.

An American Baptist friend of mine, with an interest in church history, sent me a meditation for this season in which he noted that the winter solstice (where he is) is now a 'blow-out, over-the-top, month-long party... a neo-pagan exultation of the rhythms of the earth... about lots of good food, good cheer, and the feel-good sentimentality of "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world"'. This cheerfulness, everywhere enforced by the blaring of Christmas carol tunes (the words indecipherable), seems intended to block out for a few weeks, the violence, mayhem, and chaos that are part of what it means to be a human being in this kind of world. He uses the expression 'tinselled out'.

Then he reminds us of the church's traditions at Christmastide, traditions unfamiliar to him, and to many of us, but good to be reminded of. The season lasts a mere twelve days. He takes us to the holy days which fall within that brief season, usually marked in daily prayer. After the 25th December, we would come to the 26th and its shocking theme of martyrdom - the feast of Stephen. That tends to be imprisoned in a silly song (at least a silly tune) about a king, in reality a Bohemian (Czech) Duke. But Wenceslas was known for placing his body where his theology was; he was known to get out of bed in the night, and tramp through the snow in his slippers to give alms to his poor citizens, and he is remembered as a martyr. Perhaps we ought also to say more of that other remodelled Christmas saint, Nicholas: he was one of the bishops at the first Council of Nicaea, and there is a nice story that he was so angry with the heretic Arius (about whom you heard last week) that he slapped him on the face. A thoroughly apostolic thing to do.

If you were still saying your canonical prayers on 28th December, you would be right back with King Herod, on a feast the Church has called the 'Holy Innocents', (though I note in the Uniting Church calendar, they have lost the title 'holy'). Of them St Augustine wrote,

These whom Herod's cruelty tore as sucklings from their mothers' bosom are justly hailed as the infant martyr flowers, the first buds of the church killed by the frost of persecution. They died not only for Christ but *in his stead*.

Even as we rejoice in the Christmas gospel of the Incarnation, every day we should solemnly remember in our prayers, in our giving, our time and talents, the un-named children who were and are pointlessly massacred, the weeping of the mothers, the refugees driven from their native land, the savage use of power (and what do our Allied bombers do over Syria but this?).

So this is what Jesus was doing when he stepped down into the murky Jordan with the milling crowds of hopeful people. It was part of his 'enfleshment', his part with the common crowd, the Jordan river's water flowing over his living body, closing over his head. I hope you have enjoyed the spectacular cataracts of the Iguazu Falls on the service order's cover - the Jordan is somewhat sluggish by comparison, but you don't need much water to drown in. One of the former pastors of this congregation (the College Church part), Dr Harold Leatherland, used to say that when Jesus burst out of the waters, he took in the deepest breath of his life - of Holy Spirit! Or, as the evangelists put it, the heaven opened, and the voice of God spoke of incarnate Love,

while a dove hovered above as a sign. For those gazing on, and for us, an epiphany of the divine Mystery, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God-with-us, in all our weakness, our uncleanness, our thirstiness (symbols always bring a flood of images), the God who cares for us, seeks us, and sustains the whole world.

Which is also the message of the psalm:

The voice of the LORD is over the waters;  
the God of glory thunders,  
the LORD, over mighty waters.

The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;  
the LORD sits enthroned as king for ever.

May the LORD give strength to his people!

May the LORD bless his people with peace!

Christmas icons sometimes have Jesus enthroned, but as a infant sitting regally on his Mother's knee, even with crowned head and sceptre in hand. But having escaped King Herod, this Son of Mary, *this* King, with the wounds of his crown still visible, will stand before Another on behalf of all the innocents, and all the guilty ones as well. It was for this he was born, for this he embraced his baptism, for this that he came into the world.

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