

Advent 3
11/12/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalms 146

Matthew 11:2-11

Baptism: a new humanity

Luke 1.46

In baptism we make human beings human which, of course, doesn't make very much sense. Grammatically, we are making something into itself – we have a kind of tautology, a redundancy. But, more significantly, it offends against our sensibilities of who and what we are. We understand ourselves to be perfectly human before, or outside of, our being baptised (or not). Yet the church understands that, as human as we are, there is something which is broken or tainted about that humanity. And so, the “making human” of baptism is the overcoming of that brokenness in the bestowal of a renewed humanity.

Now, this might make sense to those of us who are mature enough to reflect upon our lives and see that, Yes, there are things about me personally, and those around me, which are “broken” and need forgiveness or healing.

But how do we speak about that kind of brokenness in relation to such little ones as Hugh or Ambrose? How can it be said that their humanity is broken or tainted?

The only mistake which Hugh and Ambrose might be said to have made is in their particular choice of parents! Now, this is not a personal or moral assessment but a theological one. In fact their parents made exactly the same mistake themselves, and their grandparents made the same mistake, as did their great-grandparents. This erring can be traced right back to the beginning.

The point of giving such an account of our humanity is to say that the thing to which baptism might be conceived to be an answer is an all-enveloping reality. Baptism is not a stage on life's way, a rite of passage. We don't baptise simply because a child has been born; we don't baptise because someone has matured to the point that they can make a “decision for Christ”; we don't baptise because life's end is looming and we are made to realise that “mortal” describes also me.

Though we do baptise at any of those stages for particular persons, baptism is as all-encompassing a statement as is the condition which we all share as human beings (and so which we can say is passed on from generation to generation simply by each person being born). And so, for that reason, the church intuited and then embraced the language of death and resurrection to describe what is going on in baptism because the condition in which we find ourselves is all-enveloping. In same way, our death is all-enveloping of who we are – a kind of summarising, a bringing to an end of my particular story. Our birth is also, in the same way, a kind of totalising event – everything I do and am springs from my birth. So, when it comes to baptism we speak of a dying and a rising.

Yet this is not a patterning of death and birth, but a reference to a *particular* death and rebirth. The death and rebirth we enact in baptism resonates with the death and rebirth of Jesus of Nazareth. Just as a string on my instrument will sound if someone else plucks their instrument, tuned to the same note, so the death and resurrection which we enact in baptism is a resonance with Christ's own death and resurrection.

It is an embodied echo of the experience of Jesus himself. In Jesus, humanity took on its perfection. In our baptism, this humanity is given to us.

And it is our prayer that the resonance which begins here might become louder and louder, so that we ourselves might begin to do what Mary sang in her song (the Magnificat): becoming a magnification of the Lord as we rejoice in God who has noted our neediness and lifted us up.

This is the gospel word we speak in baptism.
