

Baptism of Jesus
7/1/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 1:1-5

Acts 19:1-7

Psalm 29

Mark 1:4-11

A Secret Epiphany

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

God, help me by your Spirit to reveal who you are, and help those that listen to reveal what is left obscure. Amen.

Yesterday was epiphany: the day we remind ourselves to check our star signs -- just in case. More straightforwardly, epiphany reminds us of the surprising revelation of God: that moment when the incarnate Christ is revealed to Gentiles, represented by those star-gazing wise men from the East.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Mark tells the story of Jesus' baptism. This seems at first glance something quite removed from epiphany. There seem to be no Gentiles to speak of, just a wild desert preacher and a young Rabbi about to take his mantle.

In fact Mark's account, when set aside the other Gospel accounts, is the most restrictive of all. In Mark's account it seems only Jesus can see the Spirit descending like a dove. John and the crowd are not privy to this divine revelation, as they seem to be in Luke and John's Gospels.

The divine voice from heaven is likewise restrictive. It addresses Jesus directly: "*You* are my beloved Son." The indirect and public declaration of Jesus' divine sonship, through the mouth of John the Baptist, or a booming Heavenly voice is absent.

The first Sunday after epiphany here we are: no gentiles, no public revelation. And worse: as soon as Jesus' divine sonship *is* revealed he is drawn out into the desert. Upon his return he begins a ministry, dare I say, marked in this Gospel by a messianic secret. No one is allowed to publicly utter that Jesus is the son of God.

This is turning out to be the worst Epiphany ever.

If epiphany is about God's surprising revelation to the gentiles, and we have today no Gentiles and no public revelation, perhaps we can see in today's reading something of a surprise.

Or perhaps it's simply unfair to frame this text as an epiphany text when in fact it's simply the story of Jesus' baptism. This is, perhaps, an instance of setting unfair expectations.

Be that as it may, I really want to press just how surprising the story of Jesus' baptism is. Indeed, as I mentioned earlier, it is so surprising that the Gospel accounts written after Mark - as the others were - felt this story needed to be retold differently. The other accounts broaden the audience of revelation. Matthew's Gospel even inserts a short conversation between Jesus and John the Baptist, acknowledging the awkwardness of John baptising Jesus.

The baptism of Jesus by John *is* awkward - and surprising, a point we will return to.

But what it is also surprising that Jesus' baptism by John is *not* Jesus' first baptism. At least, not according to some Theologians - particularly from the rich and broad Eastern Orthodox tradition.

These theologians suggest that the first baptism of Jesus was his conception. There the Spirit enabled Christ's participation in humanity. Recalling the great birthing waters over which the Spirit hovered in the beginning, God came to dwell fully in and with our humanity.

The idea of baptism in which, through the symbol of water, *we* participate in Christ, is mirrored in the Spirit's enabling of *Christ's* participation in humanity.

We might say that the liturgical period we have just passed through - advent, Christmas, epiphany - narrates the first baptism of Jesus. We have taken time to marvel at God becoming human. What, to recall last week's sermon, is the marvel of the big God coming close. The Creator God becoming human.

And yet ... Is this not old news? Good news, to be sure, *the* Good News: but we have already understood this much.

Indeed, this much is captured in our reading from the book of Acts. What we need, above all, is the same outpouring of the Spirit that enabled God to become human. This same Spirit that hovered over the waters of creation, hovering over the waters of *our* baptism.

Hallelujah!

But today we are more narrowly focused on Jesus' second baptism. Not a baptism into humanity, but a baptism of repentance.

Baptised by John: not proclaiming the new creation, but proclaiming repentance: the ruin of the old creation. John proclaims the same note of judgement that was a feature of Jewish eschatological expectation. That is, the judgement associated with the end of days, when God would wrap up this creation and begin a renewed creation.

This is the judgement that we recalled last week in recognising that in the context of the sheep and goats, we are goats. In the context of the hungry, the naked, and the stranger: we are least of all.

The broad Jewish expectation was that the Messiah would come and mete out this judgement. Dispensing God's wrath on the enemies of God, as this created order fell into ruin and a new one emerged. Perhaps this is why so many thought that John the Baptist was the Messiah. He came, after all, proclaiming judgement, calling people to repentance.

And yet in all of this, John points beyond himself. He points to someone else. He points to the Messiah who is yet to come.

And this is the surprising bit: when this Messiah arrives he does not meet the expectations of the people. He does not come as a Messiah dispensing judgement. He comes as one who submits himself to being baptised. A baptism of repentance.

What on Earth does Jesus have to repent of?

Having already been baptised into human form, Jesus further humbles himself, by being baptised in repentance, bringing himself under judgement.

In doing this Jesus subverts the expectations that he would come to give out judgement, by suggesting that instead he would undergo judgement.

And as Jesus does this, as Jesus is submerged in repentant waters, and rises out of them, the Spirit that hovers over the waters of creation comes down. As Jesus enters into our judgement he brings new creation, all of a sudden, very close.

At that moment, the new creation is begun - not at the end of time, but at the beginning of the Good News of Jesus the Messiah - the new creation is begun at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. At that moment a voice from Heaven reveals Jesus to be the Son of God.

Not only is it surprising that God would become human. But even more surprising that God would become *fully* human: mired in our failings, our sufferings, and our tragedies. What is most surprising is not simply that God would become human, but that God would become even the least among humanity.

Is this surprising revelation of the lengths God has gone for us an epiphany? The surprising lengths that lead to us being reconciled with God, and with each other? Is this an epiphany?

Or perhaps, we have to wait for that moment.

Mark's Gospel, written with sheer genius, has us wait until what seems the end of the story, to truly have our epiphany. That moment when a voice once again declares - in public - that Jesus is the Son of God. That moment on the cross. When it is no longer a voice from Heaven, but the voice of a Gentile Centurion.

Jesus does not simply show us an icon of perfect humanity. But by becoming subject to judgement, by placing himself in a state of abandonment and dereliction on the cross, he shows us how to be imperfect humanity. Jesus shows us how to live as those under judgement. To follow the way of Christ, the way of the cross, is not to abandon our fragile humanity, but to more fully acknowledge and embrace it.

To follow the way of the cross is to stand in relationship and solidarity with those who are also mired in failings, in sufferings, and in tragedies. And it is from that sharing in weakness, that sharing in the suffering of Christ, that we follow the way to new creation. The way of surprising revelations of God - perhaps even in star signs, or strange tongues.

What Jesus acknowledged on our behalf in his baptism by John is the surprising way of the Spirit hovering over birthing waters. A way that is mired, to be sure, by blood, and tears, and pain; but a way that also calls new life into being.

When Jesus stands under judgement, crying out in abandonment, in dereliction, he no longer connects himself with God, but connects himself with us and us with him. It is at that moment that a human voice can finally confess to his divinity. We are bound together by this act, by this event. And as we walk the way of the cross, we are all bound together as a community of solidarity, reconciliation, and love.

Let me finish with a quote from Lilla Watson. A Gangulu elder, artist, and indigenous activist from Queensland.

“If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time.

But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

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Amen.
