

Baptism of the Lord
13/1/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 43:1-7

Psalm 29

Acts 8:14-17

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

Ends as Beginnings

Sermon preached by Rev. Bruce Barber

I imagine that many of us will know the celebrated words from TS Eliot's "Four Quartets": "*In my beginning is my end*" or, even better in expanded form: "*What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from*". The older we get the more this truth becomes apparent. When we are young, and without a perceived end, we have no real awareness of those moments when a recognisable beginning in time might be happening that is the start of what will consequently really shape our life. Only as our lives mature to their end do the apparently disconnected arbitrary events in the past begin to assume a focus. Only then do we become conscious in a real sense of a personal history that in hindsight is grasped as being inevitable. Beginning and end become one. Not only: "*In my beginning is my end*", but, equally, we eventually come to understand that: "*In my end is my beginning*".

What is true of the lives of each of us is absolutely the case of the gospel. We can't be told too often how it is that the gospel takes shape, and how it is contrary to everything that we assume is the way things work: the conventional assumption that life moves from a beginning to an end has to give way to a much richer journey – a rear view mirror from an absolute finality to what was originally a beginning whose implications were not yet transparent. As Eliot tells us: "*The end is where we start from*".

In liturgical language this means that Easter precedes Christmas. Having lived all the years of our lives where the opposite is relentlessly absorbed, that babies come before adults, makes it all the more mandatory to register without any hint of contradiction that Easter precedes Christmas. Or, if you like why, in the chronology of the New Testament, the apostle Paul precedes the narratives of the Gospels. That is to say, there is a period of at least thirty years that bridges the gap between the event of the experienced *end of Jesus* of which Paul is witness, and the accounts of the *beginning for Jesus* as that is unfolded in the Gospels. Indeed, this temporal hiatus is the very reason why the gospels were written.

All that the earliest Christians needed to know was Paul's declaration of the continued presence of Jesus after his crucifixion. This end expressed the finality of the whole purpose of his coming. But as the first generation of Christians died, this message of Jesus' end was in danger of being divorced from its beginning in his earthly ministry. Which explains why a *theological* biography needed to be constructed, and why we today have the narrative of Luke's account of this beginning in the baptism of Jesus.

In that day there were at least three distinctive racial and religious communities; first, Jews living in Palestine; then diaspora Jews living in the Greek and Roman cultures; and finally, outright non-Jews, the Gentiles. Each community required a different explanation *within their own framework* of how the beginning of Jesus needed to be unfolded. "Within their own framework" is the operative phrase. That is why we learn everything we need to know of

these differences when we take account of where each of the gospels frames the beginning of Jesus. The earliest Gospel Mark, wanting to show how it came to be that Jesus finished on a Cross, establishes Jesus' baptism as that beginning. The next Matthew, writing for Christians previously Jews, constructs a genealogy dating Jesus' origin from Abraham, their founding Father. Luke, the Gospel before us today writing for Gentile converts, constructs another genealogy, dating Jesus' origin from Adam: Why Adam? Because Luke is writing a truly cosmic history - from its earliest *human* origin in the Gospel to its *geographical* conclusion in the Book of Acts, foreshadowed as it is in the ascension mission mandate at the beginning: witness away to the "end of the world", the pagan city of Rome as the absolute antithesis of the city of Jerusalem. And then, finally, the Gospel according to John grasps that Jesus' real beginning cannot be dated as world history at all, but arises in the very life of God: "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God*".

So today, on the first Sunday after Epiphany, we make a real beginning in hearing of Luke's purpose of the cosmic Jesus for the world – his baptism. But immediately we are told that this baptism has a context. *The crowds* came to be baptised by John the Baptist, a baptism of repentance. We live in a culture that has moralised the word repentance virtually out of existence. Repentance for this, repentance for that – always for individual acts on a scale either trivial or devastating.

This is *not* what the Gospel intends. Here repentance is altogether a much more encompassing symbol. It is essentially a theological, not a moralistic, necessity. Repentance is perhaps best understood as the need to make a U turn with the *whole* of one's life; to engage the oncoming reign of God for our life by facing the other way; by a turning to glimpse a lifegiving future, not a dead past. And it is just this vicarious baptismal repentance which Jesus shares with us, and this we are told before he does anything else at all. But then everything which follows his baptism falls into place. Each of the Gospels as they unfold demonstrates how his baptism, as an apparent beginning in time, has the Cross as its end. This means that his baptism *already* encompasses that end. There is a seamless connection between the beginning, his baptism, and his end on the Cross. "*In my end is my beginning*" Eliot proposes. And if this is the truth of *our* life, how much more is it *also* of the life of God. What greater identification of the life of God with the life of the world could be made than this *ending* of a *beginning* – the end of a cross of blood concealed in a water of baptism?

It is this same identification that has already been proposed when we hear Isaiah say to Israel: "*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name, you are mine*". For Luke, Jesus in his baptism is reaffirming: "*you are mine*". But wait. The presence of the crowd offers much more. His communal baptism foreshadows the embrace of *all* humanity; Isaiah's prospective "east to the west, the north to the south" are already incorporated in the real beginning being made in Jesus' baptism, which for him turns out to already encompass his end. It is a baptism into death, even death on a cross, but which will take another three years to be realised. In very truth, Eliot's words are as true for God as they are for us. "*What we call a beginning is ... the end*".

It is learning about just this end which is revealed in the passage from Acts. As Luke unfolds the spread of the gospel into alien lands, here into Samaria, a territory half Jewish half Gentile, he reports that "*they had only been baptised into the **name** of the Lord Jesus*". That is to say, theirs was only the sort of baptism offered by the Baptist - a real baptism of water, and hence a baptism of repentance, a turning in principle but without a fruitful promise. As such it had no future, being merely a truncated sort of baptism. It was only when Peter and John laid their hands on them that "*they received the Holy Spirit*". It is the Spirit which opens

up a future. It is the Spirit which accomplishes the U turn, which makes baptism effective as the sign of an accomplished end. It is only the Spirit who can make an end of a beginning.

And so it is for the Church down through the ages, and therefore for us too. We receive these readings on this the first Sunday after Epiphany, that is to say, after the revelation of the Jewish Jesus to his future home in the Gentile world – our world. Epiphany is that period when the Church reflects on the manifestation of Christ to all people. This first manifestation is his baptism; the last manifestation of the period of Epiphany will be his transfiguration. They belong together. A baptism at his beginning; transfiguration, as a disclosing hint on the way to his ending.

In very truth - as Eliot asserted - the *end* for Jesus reveals the baptismal place where he *began*. In the same way, as those attempting to become disciples, will we too find ourselves, sooner or later, confessing: in *his* conferred end - now made my own - is my beginning - a beginning which is also my end.
