

Baptism of Jesus
12/1/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 42:1-9
Psalm 29
Matthew 3:13-17

Baptism - Jesus' and Ours

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Rob Gallacher

The Baptism of Jesus is a very rich subject, and I am going to leave most of it out in the interests of getting you home before lunch.

I want to work with three building blocks, The Baptism of Jesus, our baptism, and the righteousness mentioned in the text. Actually “righteousness” has some overtones of moral or legal correctness that I want to avoid. I’m going to say “rightness”, to express this sense of things being right when relationships with Jesus are right.

BAPTISM OF Jesus. Jesus, who was without sin, submitted to John’s baptism of repentance. It is part of his becoming one of us. As he descends beneath the water he is identified as one with this sinful human race. We acknowledge this in the liturgy, “Jesus, bearer of our sins, have mercy on us”.

OUR BAPTISM If Jesus identifies with us in his baptism, we are identified with him in our baptism. We are baptised into Christ. It is that mutual indwelling so simply yet profoundly expressed by John 17:21, “As you, Father are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us”.

RIGHTNESS And that is rightness. In the text, Jesus overcomes John’s unease with the words “It is proper for us to fulfil all rightness”. John accepts this and is accepted.

I wonder if you can sense this mutual acceptance in the way the symbols are arranged here. There are several ways of arranging liturgical furniture, and each has its own meaning. Since it is like this now, we’ll look at this one.

Start with the font, the reminder of baptism. I haven’t studied your behaviour closely, but I have the impression that most people acknowledge its presence only by avoiding it, or sometimes stumbling over it. I see it like the turnstile at the MCG. You pass through into another space, where exciting things will happen. The font is the beginning of sacred space. Once you have passed this point you are in the place of the baptised. There is a rightness about your being here.

Now look at the line from the font to the table. I wish we could call it the altar, the place of sacrifice, where the body of Christ is broken so that the baptised may be fed. I can give you several examples where the table/altar is also seen as the tomb. It is not just the body that is broken open to give life, but all the restrictive powers are fractured. So behind the altar is the empty cross, the new life of the resurrection.

So when you take your seat, you locate yourself between two great symbols, the font, the baptism identifying Christ with you, and also your identification with Christ, and secondly, the altar and cross that represents the final rightness between you and God. So there you are, somewhere in the space between the two symbols, the place of worship, sacrament and pilgrimage, the place of sacrifice, brokenness and renewal. There is a process going on. We speak today of spiritual journey. But that is a bit : New age-y”, a

bit “me” centred The old fashioned word, “sanctification” seems stronger to me. The Spirit of God working in you, the descent of the dove on the body of Christ, till the Father says “I am well pleased”. That is rightness.

And it’s not just an individual holiness. Notice how the liturgy moves from “Jesus, bearer of our sins” to “Jesus redeemer of the world”. The rightness here is to be reproduced out there. Isaiah put it, “I have called you in righteousness ... to be a light to the nations”. (Isaiah 42: 6) Even the lectionary moves us from Baptism, on this first Sunday after Epiphany through steps to Transfiguration on the last Sunday of Epiphany. You, and the world around you, will look different. You will see differently, rightly.

The three pietas of Michelangelo pick up some of these themes.

Look first at the best known, the one in St Peter’s in Rome, done when he was only 23. When Norma and I first went into St Peter’s we had two young children, so we took one each and went our separate ways, except that we kept bumping into each other as we went back to the Pieta for yet another look. It is the classic view of a young man who sees everything very clearly. It is highly polished, balanced in composition, expressing great emotion, yet serene. It is the view of someone looking in on the scene from the outside.

The Florentine pieta is different. Michelangelo is now in the fullness of adult life, in his late 60s. The figures of Mary Magdalene and Joseph of Arimathea have been added, and the face of Joseph is a self-portrait. He has placed himself in the scene. It is no longer smooth, the lines are not so clear, and the people supporting the body of Jesus with one hand support one another with the other hand. Bonhoeffer wrote a poem called “Stations on the way to freedom”. His second stanza contains this line: “Make up your mind and come out in the tempest of living”. When you are involved in the action, the lines are not so clear, the surface not so polished.

The third Pieta displays a stage yet further on. We discovered this in Milan, and I find it the most profound of them all. Clarity has given way to mystery as Michelangelo contemplates his own death. He is 89, and this is his last work. You can make out the two figures, but who is supporting who? While Mary is supporting the dead body of her son, the crucified one is supporting her. And when you look into the indistinct face of Christ, you see that Michelangelo has dared to carve his own features onto the face of Christ. Identification. Rightness. Can you see your own face on the face of Christ? We see the face of the hungry, the sick, the poor and the imprisoned as the face of Christ. But do you take the identification of Christ with you and your identification with Christ to this point? Do others see a Christlikeness in your face? Transfiguration!

As you sit amongst the baptised, ask, Where are you on your spiritual journey? How far has that descending, sanctifying dove led you, pushed you, towards rightness?

Soon you will be invited to reaffirm your baptism. As you return from the font to sit in the sacred space, I invite you to reflect on how far you have come from your beginning in baptism, and how close you feel you are to the altar, the place of sacrifice and resurrection life? Where there is a proper rightness connecting these three.

Christ’s baptism identifies him with us.

Our baptism identifies us with Christ.

Our growth in this relationship that is right, proper righteousness.
