

Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-12

On Being Beloved

Sermon preached by Rev. Rob Gotch

It's a challenge for those living in 21st century Australia to grasp the impact of Mark's Gospel upon its original audience. It's been suggested that Mark's original audience was a Christian community in Rome during the middle decades of the first century of the common era. One of the most prominent events in that period was a Jewish rebellion against the Roman occupation of Jerusalem, with Rome responding by destroying the Jewish Temple in 70CE. This historical setting is the context in which Mark writes an innovative piece of literature, probably sent as a letter, to clarify the significance of a man who'd been crucified a few decades before. In his opening words, Mark recalls how this man, Jesus, had travelled from Nazareth to be baptized in the river Jordan. Mark describes it thus: 'And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

Any Jews in Mark's original audience would be astounded by this, surely recalling the pleading words of the prophet in Isaiah 64: 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.' Mark declares that Isaiah's plea has been answered in the most extraordinary way, not as God arrives at the head of a heavenly army to vanquish the foes of his people, but rather as Jesus is baptized by John and driven into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit. Mark stresses the sense in which the baptism of Jesus is a commissioning for his vocation of self-giving love and service. This is what baptism means for Jesus, and it sets the pattern for those who follow him.

The church declares Holy Communion and Baptism to be sacraments, because they proclaim the grace and truth of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Uniting Church Basis of Union says this about the sacraments: 'The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ has commanded his Church to proclaim the Gospel both in words and in the two visible acts of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Christ himself acts in and through everything that the Church does in obedience to his commandment: it is Christ who by the gift of the Spirit confers the forgiveness, the fellowship, the new life and the freedom which the proclamation and actions promise; and it is Christ who awakens, purifies and advances in people the faith and hope in which alone such benefits can be accepted.' (BoU, para 6)

And the Basis of Union provides the following commentary about baptism: 'The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates people into his body by Baptism. In this way he enables them to participate in his own baptism, which was accomplished once on behalf of all in his death and burial, and which was made available to all when, risen and ascended, he poured out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Baptism into Christ's body initiates people into Christ's life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit.' (BoU, para 7)

Note the description of who is active in baptism: it is Christ who incorporates people into his body, enabling them through the gift of the Holy Spirit to participate in his death and resurrection. And note the purpose of baptism: it initiates people into Christ's

life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit. This is why the Ephesian disciples, mentioned in Acts 19, are baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. They'd received the baptism of John as a sign of their desire to turn to God, but they'd not yet been commissioned for the ministry of Jesus Christ. They'd not yet been identified with Christ by being buried with him and raised with him.

In the same way, baptism commissions us to love and serve God through the power of the same Spirit. Martin Luther, the 16th century church reformer, once said that there's no greater comfort than baptism. In the midst of his own experience of affliction and anxiety, he comforted himself by repeating, 'I am baptized! I am baptized!', a mantra that affirmed his belonging to God through Jesus Christ. Note that Luther does not say, I was baptised, but I am baptised. Baptism is not merely something that happened to us in the past, often when we were so young that we can't even remember it. Baptism is a present reality in the here and now that is saturated with divine presence and power.

Our formation as disciples of Jesus Christ is no genetic certainty or accident of birth, but rather depends on the practice of a particular identity that both signifies and conveys the favour of God. Consider how our relationships form identity. When we make an introduction, it's common to say, this is my spouse, or this is my child, or this is my friend. It's interesting that the structure of these words implies possession or ownership. Linguistically, to say that a person is my spouse, or my child, or my friend does seem to suggest that I own them, because the word 'my' is derived from the word 'mine', which implies possession. But, of course, that's not what is intended. What I mean when I call a person my spouse, or my child, or my friend is that I share with each of them a particular relationship. My spouse and I share in the intimacy of marriage, my child and I share in a familial relationship, and my friend and I share in mutual affection and interests. In each relationship, there's a sense of reciprocity - I am my spouse's husband, my child's father, and my friend's friend. I belong to them, just as they belong to me, and this mutual belonging both creates and affirms our identity.

We share more with Mark's original audience than we might imagine, for we too seek to belong to Christ crucified and risen. In our world, imperial power takes various forms: Presidents of some nations are elected for life, and others secure tenure by silencing or eliminating opposition;

- Naked military aggression is dressed up in nationalist propaganda to defend against fictitious foes;
- Innocent, defenceless, non-combatants are killed by those who claim that existential threats justify collateral damage;
- Populist governments appeal to the basest of human instincts and fears, propping of their power on the back of empty promises to wreak havoc on justice and peace;
- Wealthy individuals and corporations determined to minimize and evade fair and responsible taxation;
- Our fragile planet's resources plundered and its species depleted.

In the midst of unaccountable power that threatens human flourishing, we can read Mark's Gospel just as his original audience did – as those who hold to a strange hope in a man who travelled from Nazareth to be baptized in the river Jordan and immersed into the mission of God's love. Jesus invites us to belong to him and to derive from him a baptismal identity that speaks to us of God's favour: 'You are my beloved child. With you, I am well pleased.' To the God of all grace, who has called us to eternal glory in Christ, be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.
