

Epiphany
9/01/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 42:1 - 9

Psalm 29

Acts 10:34 - 43

Matthew 3:13 - 17

Sermon preached by Rev. Barbara Gayler

Today's gospel introduces Jesus in the first public appearance of his adult life. His first action is to go down to the Jordan where John was preaching and baptising. Although John the Baptist protests, Jesus insists on submitting to John's baptism in order to 'fulfil all righteousness'. Matthew shows Jesus as the one who perfectly fulfils the Law and every expectation of the prophets. Matthew wants us to understand that Jesus is truly the one of whom the prophet Isaiah speaks - the servant God has chosen and in whom God delights.

Psalm 29 tells of the terrible beauty and power of the God of the theophany. There are several images in this psalm which make it very appropriate to be read in the Church today. The open heavens, the voice of God, and the physical element of water found in today's psalm also feature prominently in the gospel account of Jesus' baptism.

Let me say a little more about that water.....

Water is charged with symbolic meaning. For the most part we associate water with its life-giving qualities. Without water, life on earth would simply not exist. However, water is also death-dealing and destructive, as we have seen this week with daily news of flooding in Queensland on a scale almost unimaginable. An area under water twice the total area of Victoria, we are told.

Even without the trail of destruction wreaked by flood waters sweeping all before them, every year in Australia oceans, rivers, creeks and pools claim lives in water related deaths. I was very nearly drowned myself as a young child when I lost my footing on slippery rocks and fell into a deep and swift flowing channel. Fortunately for me the only adult present quickly dived in to rescue me and I achieved instant notoriety in our holiday spot when the Courier Mail reported the incident under the caption, 'Child saved from drowning'.

And of course my colleague here went down to Lorne yesterday to do battle with the sea monsters in the annual Pier to Pub. *more seriously,*

For the land-locked Israelites, the sea symbolised chaos and death. Jesus goes down into the waters at his baptism to challenge these destructive forces - as he continued to challenge them throughout his ministry and definitively overcame them through his death and resurrection. As he rises from the waters, the dove, a visual symbol of the Holy Spirit, descends upon him. The voice of God is heard, as it was at the moment of creation. In Christ, the beloved Son, God is doing a new thing.

On the question of why Jesus was baptised, Matthew suggests three things. Firstly he says that Jesus went to the Jordan to be baptised. In other words it was an intentional act - Jesus was not caught up in the enthusiasm of the moment - it was not a spontaneous response to John's preaching. Secondly John himself recognized that Jesus did not fit the image of a penitent coming for baptism, seeking forgiveness. Matthew's account of the baptism includes a dialogue between John and Jesus (missing in the other gospels) to the effect that John recognizes Jesus' superiority and is initially reluctant to baptise him. Thirdly, Jesus states his reason for being baptised, viz 'to fulfil all righteousness'. That is to say it is an act in fidelity to the will of God. God's will is that he fulfil his messianic role, not through the exercise of power and domination in the conventional way of rulers of the world, but through solidarity with the sinful, suffering, burdened mass of humanity. Submission to John's baptism is the first step Jesus takes on that path. It sets the pattern and the direction for the ministry he is now about to begin.

Despite their slightly differing accounts of the baptism of Jesus, Matthew, Mark and Luke are all in complete agreement on the key aspects of theological significance:

1. The heavens were opened - a sign associated with divine revelation.
2. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus, empowering him for the ministry which lay ahead of him.
3. The voice from heaven declares Jesus as the beloved Son in whom God is well pleased.

These are all important indicators that what we have here in the baptism of Jesus is truly an epiphany event. 'Epiphany' means 'to appear', 'to show forth', 'to make manifest'. Today's gospel is understood as an epiphany of Christ, as is last week's story of the visit of the magi to the manger, and also the account of Jesus turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana in the gospel of John. All are epiphanies in which Jesus' true identity is revealed.

In a very understated way, Matthew's story of the baptism of Jesus speaks of God as the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son receives the Spirit. The Father then declares his love for the Son. What the Son will do has the blessing of the Father. This passage of scripture contains an early manifestation of the doctrine of the Trinity which the Church was to formulate much later in the Fourth century.

The baptism of Jesus in the waters of the Jordan is also a precursor to the crucifixion, which Jesus also alludes to as his 'baptism'. 'Can you be baptised with the baptism with which I am baptised?' he asks his disciples. 'Can you drink the cup which I must drink?' This is about the cross.

A few weeks ago after one of the services in Advent, Mary Duckworth was telling me about her favourite painting of the Annunciation, in the National Gallery in London. I was sure I had seen the painting she described, but neither of us could remember the name of the artist. (Duccio? Fra Lippi?)

In my search to source the Annunciation painting, I found another painting from the National Gallery's collection, Piero della Francesca's, 'The Baptism of Christ'. This is one of the rare occasions when we at Mark the Evangelist are the poorer for not having an overhead screen, but I have brought the beautiful illustrated book, 'Painting the Word' by John Drury which you are welcome to look at later.

Drury devotes several pages to the theological significance of this painting of the Baptism. Let me read just one paragraph:
'Christ's feet are placed where the water of the stream changes from being a calm mirror of the hills above to a shallowness which lets us see its stony bed. According to the Gospels it was as Jesus came up from the water, in that crossing over, that God declared him to be his only Son. It is a moment of definition, but also a moment of transition. In terms of the **past**, it recapitulates Israel's exodus. In terms of the **future**, it prophesies Christ's own passing from death to life. Although he is now as naked as he will be at his death, to which his baptism commits him, the pink cloak, which he has left with the angel nearest to him, will clothe his resurrected body as he rises omnipotent from the tomb in Piero's fresco in the Town Hall at San Sepolcro in Italy, his sacrifice complete'. (Piero della Francesca's wonderful painting of The Resurrection is also reproduced in the book.)

There is a nice symmetry in these two paintings of the Baptism and the Resurrection which link the beginning and the end of the earthly ministry of Jesus.

To conclude -

In all the gospels, Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of his public ministry. At his baptism he received God's blessing on him and on the work he is about to begin. At baptism we too receive God's blessing on us and begin our journey in ministry.

However Christian baptism does not take its bearings from today's gospel. It does not seek to replicate the event at the Jordan. Rather, baptism is a sacramental act which unites us with Christ, crucified and risen – symbolically dying with him that we might also be raised with him.

In our baptism we are born to a new way of living. Our own messy lives are united with Christ in his dying and rising. That is why, although many of us were baptised as infants and may have no memory of the event, we should, like the great reformer of the church, Martin Luther, take every opportunity to remember that we are baptised, and be thankful.

Sources

John Drury '[Painting the Word](#)'

Brendan Byrne '[Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today](#)'

Fred Craddock *et al* '[Preaching through the Christian Year](#)'