

Baptism of Jesus
10/1/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 1:1-5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1-7
Mark 1:4-11

Baptised as the Foundation of the World

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

*God may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not.
Amen.*

“Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth? ... When the morning stars sang together, and all the children of God shouted for joy?”

Book of Job. Chapter 38. Verses 4 and 7.

‘The Tree of Life’, an experimental film by director Terrence Malick, begins with this quotation from scripture. The film itself centres on the death of a child and the reverberating effects of this death on the child’s parents and older brother. To tell this story Malick weaves together images from across all of creation: from the formation of galaxies, surprising acts of mercy from prehistoric creatures, the human anxieties of modern life, and extending to the inevitable destruction of the Earth from the explosion of our sun.

‘The Tree of Life’ suggests that the tragic death of this child can only be understood when it is seen as a tear within the tapestry of reality itself. The singular tragedy at the centre of Malick’s film cannot be treated as an isolated event, but must be allowed to raise fundamental questions about the nature of the world itself.

The film, in the end, poses the question to the characters - and I suspect the viewer as well: is the world fundamentally a world of forgiveness, grace and healing or is everything, in the end, simply the ambivalent march of nature and its forces? More pointedly: by which reality will you respond and live? Will you live out forgiveness and grace in the midst of tragedy, or be consumed by the ever apparent ambivalence of the world?

Something like Malick’s experimental film is what we find in the four readings from Scripture offered to us by the lectionary for today. The central event is the baptism of Jesus. And yet, in order to tell this story the lectionary suggests that this story be set within an ever widening horizon of God’s activity in the world.

The story itself, taken from Mark’s Gospel, already alludes to the Jewish tradition into which Jesus himself was born and raised. The figure of John the Baptist is cast as a tether between the prophetic hopes of Israel’s history, and the pending arrival of the Messiah, who is said to bring with him the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. To tell the story of Jesus’ baptism requires reaching back into Israel’s history, recalling the hope kindled in the midst of the tragedy of exile. The prophetic hope the figure of John embodies is the hope that God would vindicate God’s people and restore the good order of the world. This hope is echoed in today’s Psalm, as it gives voice to an acclamation of praise and hope.

At the same time we have also heard in the book of Acts a short story from the emerging Christian community in the city of Ephesus. There the community, seeking to be faithful to Jesus, had been baptised as Jesus was baptised: as an act of repentance, in the manner taught by John. Paul encourages these early Christians to see in Jesus not simply an example, but the beginning of a new way which grows out of and continues beyond the history which came before it.

In these references back towards the prophetic history of Israel, and forward to the small community of believers huddled in someone's house for prayer, we begin to understand how it is that this singular event of Jesus' baptism is set within the broad tapestry of the world. The full weight of this baptism's impact can only be felt when we begin to appreciate how it reaches out beyond itself, and stakes a claim about the nature and reality of the world itself.

It is worth being clear about what we are talking about when we talk about Jesus' baptism at this point. The *Basis of Union*, the founding theological statement of our church, offers the following:

“[Christ's] 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.” (*BoU* # 7)

In truth these words from the *Basis of Union* are not so much about Jesus' baptism - at least not the baptism we are commemorating today. Rather, these words from the *Basis* help us to distinguish between our own baptism and that of Jesus in the waters of the Jordan. For us, in our baptism we enter the harsher waters of cross and resurrection, where the Spirit of Fire leads us through death and into the new vistas of God's resurrection. The baptism of Jesus in the Jordan is set quite apart from our own baptism; it is not the primary example from which our own sacred bath is drawn.

Although many were invited into the waters of the Jordan by John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism in the Jordan river stands alone, even among these. John, who offered a baptism of repentance, invited people to turn back towards God. For Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, this scarcely makes sense: even John anticipates that Jesus will go far beyond what he has to offer. (For a bit of homework, you might compare this story in Mark to how it is retold in Matthew, where we are told John initially resists baptising Jesus.) There is no need for Jesus, the sinless one, to turn back to the God who is his true Father. Indeed this is precisely what Jesus' baptism reveals: in rising out of the waters the Spirit descends like a dove, the voice of the God proclaims like a tender Mother who Jesus truly, uniquely is: the Beloved Son, in whom the pleasure of God dwells most fully.

The baptism of Jesus is a free act of obedience: Jesus is not compelled into the waters of baptism because he needs to repent. Jesus' willingness to enter the waters of John's baptism is the sure sign that Jesus is already compelled by full obedience to the loving God. Jesus freely demonstrates his willingness to go where God wills to go: deep into the condition of our humanity, sharing with us in the journey back to God - even while he can never be apart from God. It is for this reason that only Jesus could enter the waters of the Jordan as he does. Jesus, the beloved Son, could never be apart from the Father whose pleasure dwells upon him, and because of this his baptism by John can be nothing other than a free act of love, a free act of self-giving, a free act of coming towards us to journey with us back to God.

This is the singular event we commemorate today, the unique act that only God in Jesus Christ could do. And because of this act, because of this free movement towards us to bring us back to God, we see more fully the nature of God. Here we cannot be content with a narrow focus on a Rabbi's ministry beginning in a river. We must also head the words from the full sweep of scripture, the full sweep of history: the prophetic hope of Israel beginning to be realised, the story of those early communities gathered in prayer, the story of us here and wherever we are. All of this must be told in order to understand what the baptism of Jesus means: that God has come in Jesus the Christ to enter into our human state, not only to call us, but to journey with us back towards the beloved Father.

It is only right that the full reach of this act of divine love and solidarity invokes the deep story of creation from the very beginning. Here our reading from Genesis 1 must finally come into view - at the end, and yet also at a beginning. The God who brings the world into being by speaking light has come into the world to journey with us back to the light. I say here deliberately the God who "*brings*," the God who everyday renews the light and life, hope and love of the world comes into this world to re-establish again and again this light and love. This is what the baptism of Jesus is about: it is the anchor of God's free movement towards us, to call us back to light and life, hope and love. God once and for all came into the world to repair the tear in the tapestry of love which good creation ought to be. This is what is made visible when we recall Jesus' baptism in the waters of the Jordan: the heavens open and the pleasure of God is proclaimed to dwell in the Beloved Son, so that this good pleasure might again be recalled as God's good gift to the whole world. This is a story that cannot be told without reference back to the very beginning, to the very foundations of the world: not as a statement of history, but as a proclamation of the ongoing, ever new pulsating creative life of God for the world. God who speaks light into an unlit world, hope into the midst of despair, love into the midst of hate, enters into our humanity through baptismal waters.

We must again ask the question which Job offered as we began:

"Where were you when God laid the foundations of the Earth? ... When the morning stars sang together, and all the children of God shouted for joy?"

By the rivers of the Jordan, when God's free love was offered in solidarity with our humanity. In exile when God's people yearned for justice. In small houses gathered for prayer. In North Melbourne, and in our homes, gathering to worship.

Where were we when God laid the foundations of the Earth?

We are here. We are in this world which is renewed daily with light and love, even against all chaos and resistance. Even as the light seems to fade and evening seems to come we proclaim the new beginning of morning. We proclaim the shining light and self-giving love of God, which relentlessly comes to us: journeying with us back to life and hope. This is what the singular event of Jesus' baptism shows to us: that God is for us, loves, yearns to weave us into the tapestry of love which the world ought to be.
