

Baptism and Beginnings

January 2022

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Today one of our readings set in the lectionary was from the beginning of the Gospel according to Luke. Here we read about the coming of John the Baptist and his proclamation about the coming Messiah who would be the Son of God and the Saviour of Israel and by extension, the whole world - and the reading goes on to describe the baptism of Jesus. An important event being recorded in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

This reading I think is particularly appropriate as we move into 2022 – a brand new New Year with potential and promise we hope and a good deal better than the previous year!

Firstly it was in a sense a launching time for the ministry of Christ. We don't know a whole lot about the early life of Jesus as he was growing up. We have scant details of those first 30 years. Presumably he was helping his father Joseph in the carpentry trade, living with family in Nazareth and slowly but surely maturing, becoming aware of his closeness to God and the role awaiting him. Even at the age of twelve all this was starting to dawn on him.

So the baptism was a sort of rite of passage when he decided to move into his ministry. This would have been no easy decision as it entailed leaving home and family, becoming itinerant and facing opposition, hostility, especially from the scribes and pharisees – and at times, outright danger coming to a tragic climax at Calvary. So at the time of his baptism, he was trading the relative peace and tranquillity of life in Nazareth for what was to come.

Baptism traditionally is a time of new beginnings when we are washed and cleansed. Figuratively dying to our old way of life and emerging from the water cleansed and renewed. Now we believe it is the case that Jesus actually had no sins to wash away and yet he chose this moment to identify with all of us and become one of us. John was loath to actually baptise Jesus saying it should be the other way round – and yet Jesus insisted, to make a statement and identify with all of us.

The second point I want to make is that the event of the baptism underlines God's closeness and approval of Jesus. He was indeed a human like the rest of us, but he was also the Son of God. We read that there was a voice coming out of heaven "You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well, pleased." So God was very close at this baptism. In actual fact we get the impression that God

was very close wherever Jesus was, and whatever he did – whether it was healing the sick or teaching or stilling tempests or hanging to die on a cross.

It is interesting to note that Luke's account says "You are my Son " a personal message to Jesus to give him confidence to embark on his mission. Whereas the message recorded in Matthew is "This is my Son whom I love" rather as if it were an announcement to all those around, announcing that Jesus was unique in a very special way. A slight difference in wording but as a result a difference in emphasis. Maybe the message was meant to be both.

The other thing about these accounts is that the Holy Spirit descended in the form of a dove – the symbol of gentleness quite separate from the wildness of John the Baptist. William Barclay, in his commentary on Mark's Gospel emphasises this interesting contrast,

"John's was a message of the axe laid to the root of the tree, of the terrible sifting, of the consuming fire. It was a message of doom and not of good news. But from the very beginning, the picture of the Spirit likened to a dove is a picture of gentleness. He will conquer, but the conquest will be the conquest of love."

My third point is to look at and learn from John the Baptist.

John was indeed a wild man; hardly the staid and steady type who would regularly attend the synagogue.

John's clothes were made from camel's hair, tied with a leather belt, and his diet was locusts and wild honey! He also called a spade a spade, he was not backward and coming forth in speaking his mind and condemning people – a trait which led to his ultimate demise when he started condemning Herod for his marital arrangements.

I can imagine if John were to come to one of our church services and sat in the back seat it would be extremely awkward! He would be ragged and no doubt in the need of a good bath! He would raise quite a few eyebrows, and most of us would surreptitiously move to the front.

And yet, and yet John the Baptist was certainly God's servant and part of God's eternal plan. He was even born under miraculous circumstances with his father

Zechariah being struck dumb after a visit from the angel Gabriel. In Gabriel's words

He will be great in the sight of the Lord and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God and he will go before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous – to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

He is honoured and recognised as “John the Forerunner” in Eastern Orthodox churches, and the Prophet John (or Yahya) in Islam.

Even Jesus honoured John saying

“I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist”

And my point is this – God often works through unlikely sources – not necessarily people fitting into our preconceived pattern.

It is good sometimes to pause, to reset and revalue our priorities – especially at the beginning of a New Year. What do we think is important, what do we see as the most valuable things we have in our life. Sometimes when we are working at home, our computer gets into a very confused state. Nothing seems to work properly or seems to work quite oddly. Not doing the things we are used to – not doing the things it should! The software has had a glitch or a hiccup and the only way out of the problem is to shut everything down and reset the whole system.

- Sometimes also our faith can acquire a lot of clutter.
- We can get tied up with a lot of dogma,
- or tradition that we mindlessly follow without any real reason,
- or we have disagreements about the way we should do things,
- or the way in which we should interpret this or that particular part of the Bible.
- We can get tied up in the organisational structure of things,
- We can get over critical and disappointed with other people.

- or get stressed and burdened by the number of meetings we have to attend at church.

If so, then it is time to reset, to reboot and get back to basics, and the message from John the Baptist is a good way to do this.

“The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God”.

John is pointing to Jesus as being blessed by God’s Holy Spirit and who will also bless others with God’s Holy Spirit. John is saying this man is special with a unique relationship with God the Father. He says he is not fit even to carry Jesus’ sandals.

Maybe we should take a lesson from John and also point to Jesus in what we say, what we believe and how we live. Forget the complicated theology that we barely understand. Forget our minor differences. Forget the ways we are sometimes disappointed with each other. Put all this to one side and point to Jesus.

If we make Jesus the very centre of our lives it is like we make him the hub of our wheel of life and we are the spokes. As we strive to move closer to him as spokes come together at the centre – so we find that we are also coming closer to our friends, colleagues and fellow-worshippers. Differences that seemed so important previously pale into insignificance as we seek to learn from our Master – who, though the Son of God – knew the hurly burley of everyday life, its frustrations and disappointments as we cope with day to day living.

This last year has been a horrible year because of the Covid virus. This year has been full of medical heroes working tirelessly and caring at the front line with great risk of contracting the virus and even dying.

Although I don’t know for sure; if these brave people represent the usual cross section of Australian society, not many would have been regular church goers.

And yet what they have been doing over this past year has reflected the essence of Christian love.

God’s spirit of love and sacrifice can be found in so many places, in so many ways – and not necessarily just within the walls of a church.

Last week we celebrated the feast of Epiphany when we remembered the wise men coming from the East. They had travelled long and far –maybe for almost two years. maybe from Persia (Iran) - bearing gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh to give homage to the Christ child. They were not Jews, they did not worship in synagogues. Rather the understanding is that they were astrologers, maybe not churched in any way! Maybe they were closer to God than all the priests, Pharisees and sadducees and all their ecclesiastical structure.

And yet they were very much part of God's plan – being warned by God in a dream not to go back to Herod who had such a murderous intent.

We could go on mentioning cases where great people have done great things in line with God's Holy Spirit and plan – even if they were not conventional Christians. The Dalai Llama and Mahatma Ghandi come to mind but there are hosts of others. Fred Hollows and Dr Victor Chang and many more!

As we move into a brand New Year – 2022 – maybe this is a good lesson to learn – that God can act in surprising ways using unexpected people. He is not limited to the walls of a church, or even our way of worship. He is a much greater God than just our limited vision.

John the Baptist was a wild man but he was God's wild man. He was a channel for God's work in the world.

Baptism and beginnings! As we move into the New Year, hand in hand with God, maybe there will be some surprises in store, maybe from directions that are quite surprising!

Amen