



Sermon preached by The Revd Dr David Cornick on Sunday 10 January 2021

Readings: Mark 1:4-13; Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7

Mark's gospel is compact to the point of brevity. Not for him the leisurely reflection of a leader writer or the clever plotting of a novelist. It's all punch and action. His gospel moves at a furious pace. The phrase he uses most is '...and immediately'. His account of the baptism of Jesus and his temptation in the wilderness takes just under a hundred words in English, and 83 in Greek, but each word is packed with meaning.

He takes us to the heart of the meaning of Jesus' baptism. First of all he anchors it in history. It happened '...in those days', the days of the ministry of his strange cousin John, wild man of the wilderness. Mark tells us that John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We have to turn to Matthew and Luke to discover more.

When we do, we become witnesses to a religious revolution. The crowds come for baptism. Does John welcome them? No, he greets them as 'a brood of vipers' who hide behind the smug certainties of religion – 'We have Abraham as our ancestor' – when what mattered was action – mercy, honesty, equity. Those with two coats should share them with those who have none. Tax collectors shouldn't practice extortion. Soldiers should stop false accusations and be satisfied with their pay. (Luke 3:10f). The people of God should mirror God's goodness, and God was on the move. God was doing a new thing, declaring a new age, and John's baptism was its sign. But Jesus was its content, and that is why it was so important that John baptised him in the Jordan, doubtless along with many others. As the Jordan waters covered him, Jesus was identifying himself with God's revolution, and that meant a life of making choices and answering difficult questions. What would it mean to be part of God's new age of justice and equity? What kind of nation should Israel be? How could Israel be God's holy people when pagan Rome ruled and infiltrated every aspect of national life?

Engaging with those kind of questions was dangerous. The movers and shakers, the influencers, the powerful and their brokers all had vested interests. As he rose from the waters Pilate and Caiaphas were on the distant horizon.

Mark also assures us, secondly, that Jesus' baptism gladdened God's heart, for a voice was heard from heaven – 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' The idea of an individual being described as God's 'son' is rare in the Old Testament. It is used very sparingly, and in two ways. There are two references in the Psalms (2:7; 89:27) to kings being as it were 'adopted' as sons of God, and in the apocryphal book Wisdom, the righteous man is described as a child of God (2:13-18). This then is a singular moment, and it means that Jesus is the one who embodies that new relationship between God and his people which John was preaching. No one who encounters Jesus will ever be the same again, for the road to which Jesus is setting foot has God's seal of approval. The revolution has begun. The baptised are its shock troops.

Third, in a moment of high drama, Mark tells us the heavens were 'torn apart', and the Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove.' As Jesus ministry begins, the heavens are 'torn apart'. Three

years later when the power brokers and politicians thought they'd bundled Jesus the troublemaker into the archives of history, there was another tearing and as Jesus breathed his last the Temple veil was torn in two from top to bottom. This was probably the outer veil, a curtain some 80 feet high, which the Jewish historian Josephus described as a '...Babylonian tapestry, with embroidery of scarlet and purple, wrought with marvellous skill.' He goes on to explain that the design '...typified the universe...portrayed on the tapestry was a panorama of the entire heavens.' Mark intended the echo to be heard. Jesus' ministry began with the rending of the heavens and ends with the artistic portrayal of the cosmos being torn in two. What is happening at the Jordan waters isn't simply an episode in history. It has cosmic repercussions.

In history, gladdening God's heart, changing the cosmos – Mark says a lot in a few words.

As the early Christian church reflected on that story of the baptism and the descent of the Spirit, their minds turned almost inevitably to another Scriptural story about water and the Spirit, the quelling of the watery chaos, and the Spirit, or a great wind – perhaps the one is a metaphor of the other – hovering over it, bringing order, universe, life itself. And God declares it good. It was a small step from there to understanding their own baptisms as the portal to what Paul calls 'a new creation'. (2 Cor 5:17), a life of participation in the eternal life of Christ, nourished by bread and wine, forged by prayer and stories of Scripture. Indeed, but that's just half the story.

Listen to Mark again. Today's lection is supposed to stop with the voice from heaven. I've added the next two sentences – 'And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness for forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels ministered to him.'

Mark's favourite phrase 'and immediately'. What a juxtaposition. One minute you've got God's favour and are being addressed as 'Beloved' and the next you're booted into the wilderness. You'd forgive Jesus for feeling a bit hard done by. If this was the result of God's favour, what might his displeasure be like?

This is a place of desolation and danger, a far remove from the Jordan waters. Wild animals lurk, images in the Old Testament of Israel's enemies. This is the place of demons and doubt. And note that Mark, unlike Matthew and Luke, gives us no indication of the outcome of the temptations, and that's important. I added those two verses to today's lection because baptism and temptation belong together. Baptism isn't an escape from the world, it's a passport to engage with it for God's sake. Temptation doesn't go away, nor does ambiguity or risk. If you like, temptation is the context in which the baptised have to live.

Rowan Williams has helpfully pointed out that the icons of the Christian East which portray the baptism of Jesus show him up to his neck in water, and often sitting under the waves are the river gods of the old world, representing the chaos that is being overcome.

The incarnation was never going to be a picnic. In his poem 'The Coming' R.S. Thomas imagined God holding up a 'small globe'. It is a scorched land, 'crusted buildings' casting shadows, a slimy serpent of a river unfolding itself; on a 'bare' hill a cross saddens the sky as multitudes hold 'thin' arms up to it.
'The son watched Them. Let me go there, he said'
(*Later poems 1972-82* London, MacMillan 1983)

The incarnation is a rescue mission. It's about recovering the humanity God intended his people to have before they mired it with selfishness, stupidity and a destructiveness which knows no bounds. It was about becoming part of the chaos, so that God's new age could begin in the people of Israel and the company of those who were called to share Jesus's baptism. If that restoration was to happen, Jesus had to be fully part of our chaotic human world.

And so in an outhouse, a poor teenage girl gave birth, shepherds came, and over the horizon sages began their long camel journey, for a light shone in the darkness. Christmas is long gone, but during Epiphany we rejoice that the light shines still amidst confusion, chaos, sickness and fear. As this new year takes shape, we need to remember that. The light shines. For Jesus came, and was baptised, died and rose and gathers us into his company, determined and doubting, sharing his life, confronting the chaos.

As we celebrate the baptism of Jesus, a question remains. Where should the baptised be found? The answer, of course, is with Jesus. And if you want to know where Jesus is, go into the heart of the chaos, the confusion and the suffering. That's where you'll find him, with the vulnerable, the frightened, the poor, the sad, the hurt. And that is where the baptised should be. With their Lord. May that be our manifesto for 2021.

Amen.