

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Reflection – First Sunday after Epiphany – 10th January 2021

The Baptism of Jesus

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As you will have realised, the gospel readings this year are from the gospel of St. Mark. I like Mark's gospel. It is different from the two other comparable gospels, Matthew and Luke. Mark's gospel is more dynamic. It moves at pace driven by words such as straightway and immediately. It is the all- action gospel. We have the book called the Acts of the Apostles or the Acts of the Holy Spirit as I like to call it. Mark's gospel could be called the Acts of Jesus as more than Matthew and Luke, Mark focuses on what Jesus did rather than His teachings. For example, Mark has most of the miracles but few of the parables. And Mark is straight into the action. Mark has no genealogies of Jesus as in Matthew and Luke. He also omits all reference to Jesus' birth and childhood. With only a brief introduction, he plunges immediately into the public ministry of Jesus. This may have been because Mark was writing at Rome and the Romans glorified action. The Romans did not ask "Where did He come from?" or "What did He say?" but "What has He done?" That is the question that Mark answers for them regarding Jesus climaxing in the death, resurrection and salvation of Jesus, the Son of God.

Our reading this morning starts at verse four of the first chapter of Mark thus omitting the first verse in which Mark states the purpose of his gospel and indeed gives the title of the whole book. Mark starts his gospel writing "the beginning of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God". Note that Mark says "the Good News about Jesus Christ" rather than "the Good News preached by Jesus."

Having said that, two thirds of our reading this morning is about John the Baptist as we are told the details of even what John wears and eats; details that we are never told anywhere about Jesus as far as I know. However, it is the baptism of Jesus that Mark relates simply and quickly that we want to focus on. It is extraordinarily special to me as we have in one place at the same time the three persons of the Trinity. In addition to Jesus, we have God who speaks and the Holy Spirit who appears in the form like a dove, not that the Holy Spirit was a dove but appeared like a dove which was probably the best simile that Mark

could think of. This baptism is also extraordinary because it marks the beginning of the Messianic ministry of Jesus.

Let us look at the reasons why Christ chose to be baptised; and maybe we should use a verb stronger than chose, because when John questioned whether he, John, should baptise Jesus, Jesus insisted that he must be baptised. There were several reasons for this:

- As Jesus was sinless, he did not need the repentance and cleansing from sin which John's baptism signified but by his baptism, Jesus completely identified himself with us and our sin
- The baptism indicated that Jesus was consecrated by God and officially approved by God as shown in the descent of the Holy Spirit and the words of approval that God spoke. All of God's righteous requirements of the Messiah were met in Jesus
- At Jesus' baptism, John publicly announced the arrival of the Messiah that he had prophesied about and the inception of Christ's ministry
- A fourth reason was to fulfil and illustrate John's prophecy that with Christ's arrival, from there on, baptism was to be by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not simply alight on Jesus; Jesus is infused with the Holy Spirit, permeated by the Spirit, instilled, imbued, completely filled with the Spirit from God.
- His baptism was an example for his followers to enact in their lives

And the impact was immediate. Matthew says the heavens opened but Mark is more dramatic. He says the heavens were torn apart and God was let loose on the world. I added the second part. Perhaps that is a forward-looking allusion to Christ's death on the cross when the veil of the temple was torn in two but whether or not that was intended, the entire fabric of creation, the nature of creation was changed by the baptism of Jesus. And I think that Mark subtly prepared us for this in the opening words of his gospel when he wrote "the beginning" which is an echo of the verses of our OT reading "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth". Christ's baptism marked the beginning of the remaking of the heavens and the earth.

From there I want to explore other links between our readings including the psalm as there is one ever present theme from the beginning of time, throughout the Old Testament, Christ's ministry and living today. And that is the voice of God. There is something extra special about God's voice because He makes things happen when He speaks. In our OT reading today God spoke and

it happened. He said let there be light and there was light and following that, let the dry land appear. And it was so. Let the earth put forth vegetation. And it was so. Let there be sun and moon. And it was so. God said let the earth and the sea bring forth living creatures and it was so. There is power in the voice of God, in the words of God. God's voice is for more than communication. It brings about action. Words don't just describe things. They do things. They make things happen. They change people. They have the power to do good and as we saw in Washington DC last week; they have the power to do harm. The pen might be mightier than the sword but neither is as powerful as the spoken word especially the spoken of word of God.

Turning to our Psalm we see the power of God's voice. The voice of the Lord is over the waters; breaks the cedars, causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare. The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire and shakes the wilderness. All this begins with Gloria in excelsis and ends with peace to men on earth thus wrapping a nice Christmas ribbon around the voice of God. It is thought that the Psalmist may have been inspired to write this psalm after witnessing the power of a thunder and lightning storm which can be awesome indeed.

So, as we start this new year it is worth each of us asking ourselves whether the voice of God still has the power of thunder and lightning to us. If not (and for many this would be an honest assessment), we should come humbly to God and confess that His voice, His Word, sounds more like the drop of a paper clip than a thunderbolt – and ask for a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit to make our cold hearts warm once again, and our dull hearing sharp once more.

I thought a good way to do this on the day that we remember Christ's baptism would be to repeat the vows that were made on our behalf when we were baptised or maybe we said ourselves if we were old enough when we were baptised as I was. So, if you are able, would you like to stand please?

Minister: We all wander far from God and lose our way. Christ comes to find us and welcomes us home. In baptism we respond to his call. Therefore, I ask: Do you turn away from sin? **All: I do.**

Minister: Do you reject evil? **All: I do.**

Minister Do you turn to Christ as Saviour? **All: I do.**

Minister: Do you trust in him as Lord? **All: I do.**

Minister: Let us affirm our common faith in Jesus Christ. Do you believe and trust in God the Father,

source of all being and life, the one for whom we exist? **All: I believe and trust in him.**

Minister: Do you believe and trust in God the Son, who took our human nature, died for us and rose again? **All: I believe and trust in him.**

Minister: Do you believe and trust in God the Holy Spirit, who gives life to the people of God

and makes Christ known in the world? **All: I believe and trust in him.**

This is the faith of the Church. **All: This is our faith. We believe and trust in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.**

Amen.