

## The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, 8<sup>th</sup> January 2012 – All's Good

Reading: Mark 1: 4-11

“In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.”

We have two baptisms (at 9.30) this morning and how appropriate is that as we celebrate the end of the Christmas season with the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord.

By way of warning I need to say that there is a genuine danger in letting me loose on the subject of baptism. I've spent much of the past 20 years studying Christian initiation from liturgical, theological, historical and sacramental perspectives. I can tell you all about the history of baptism, what it's meant and what it means, to us and others, I can give you detailed accounts of how baptism has been practiced down through the ages and the ways in which that has shaped and moulded our approach to virtually everything else we do. I can, in other words, bore you with details you don't even realise you don't want to know, and I'm going to try to resist that urge, and in particular I'm going to resist saying anything about Acts 19 which some in their ignorance will try to tell you is the biblical foundation for confirmation, but I couldn't possibly comment, because I'm resisting the urge.

I say all that because those who know my academic interests might get a little concerned when I say I want to begin our reflection on the baptism of Jesus by talking about our own prayer book. Try not to get too worried.

When our New Zealand Prayer Book was published in 1989 there were several things in it that raised eyebrows in the Anglican world. It was the first Anglican prayer book to address God as 'you' and use symbols and images from its own cultural context rather than that of England. It was one of the first to use a multitude of languages and, of course, it deliberately left out any services in 17<sup>th</sup> century sounding English. What really shocked some people though was our baptism service. It's not the words or the images that cause concern it's where they're placed. Unlike almost every other baptism service in the Anglican world ours asks those being baptised, or those who speak for them, to declare their faith after they've been sprinkled or soaked with water not beforehand.

You can look later for yourself if you're not sure what I mean. In our baptism service we ask a few questions that essentially make sure this is what you or your parents really want, and then you get wet. We pour water on your head and as we do we repeat the same words that Christians have said for two thousand years, the same words Christians in almost every church and denomination still say today, "I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." And only then, after you're wet and it's too late to take it back, only then do we ask what you believe, and that's no accident.

Our baptism service makes a deliberate and in some places controversial statement; it doesn't matter what you say, God welcomes you regardless. That's not the case in some churches. There are some churches where what you say matters very much at baptism, and unless you say it you can't be baptised. That's not the case in our church. In our baptism service baptism is first and foremost a divine act of grace, something God does for you freely and without refrain. That's how I answer the questions of those who wonder

why we baptise babies who can't make their own choices; firstly I say because it's good for them, and we don't wait until children are old enough to choose before giving them food or drink or clothes to wear. Secondly though, and probably more importantly, I say it's because baptise isn't about what we say or choose, it's about what God does freely for us. Later we might choose to embrace our baptism or not, but God gives it regardless, which takes us back to the baptism of Jesus.

The baptism Jesus received is not the same as ours. The gospel makes that clear, "I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit", and the Acts reading about which I am saying nothing makes that even more clear. We are baptised in Jesus name and Jesus, obviously, was not. Those differences aside, however, there are I believe some significant similarities, and this is one: God chose Jesus regardless of whether Jesus chose God.

It's not by accident that Mark's gospel begins the story of Jesus with his baptism. We might think about that, especially at this time of year. In this earliest of all the four gospels there is no Christmas story. No angels, no shepherds, no Bethlehem or baby in a manger, instead Mark chooses to begin at the point where Jesus, around thirty years old by now, comes to John for baptism.

I've often wondered if as he climbed out of the Jordan that day Jesus had any idea what he was letting himself in for. I doubt it. I doubt that Jesus had the faintest idea what was to come because if he had he might just have stayed in the water. I doubt that Jesus knew because I believe that the Word was made flesh. We heard those words on Christmas morning; "The Word was made flesh and lived among us". Jesus was a real eating, breathing, bleeding and ultimately dying human being and we human beings have no real idea what lies ahead. We might think we do, we might even have a pretty good idea of it, but the truth is that by the time we know what the future really holds it's already the past. And being human means more often than not we get to choose. Will I go this way or that, will I do this thing or that – Jesus didn't know and Jesus got to choose, and because Jesus got to choose I personally don't think God really knew either. God didn't really know what Jesus would choose at all the crucial points in his life to come, and yet we have this astonishing, incredible, baptism.

"And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him."

Unlike the other accounts we have, in Mark what happens as Jesus comes out of the water is just between him and God. Only Jesus sees the heavens torn and the dove descend. This is a private moment, an intimate moment, and in that moment, with all the moments to come still shrouded in mystery, only Jesus can hear God's voice, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

This is a a moment of love between a parent and a child, and in that moment God says this is who you are, and I am pleased. There's an echo here again of a moment in the Genesis story when God looks at the creation and says it is good. It's a moment that doesn't rely on prayers or songs or statements of faith, it's just a simple moment of grace in which if God were a kiwi, God would simply say, all good.

As we baptise(d) Amy and Oliver this morning I hope they listen(ed) carefully for that voice, but maybe they didn't, it doesn't really matter. God spoke anyway, just as God spoke at my baptism and your baptism and at every baptism; God speaks and says 'this is my beloved son or daughter, and with you I am well pleased.' What comes next isn't clear yet, but God speaks regardless. Whether Oliver or Amy will embrace their baptisms or not, only time will tell, but that doesn't change what happens here this morning. In this moment, this divine moment, God speaks to them, whether they listen or not, whether they hear or not, whether they respond or not, the heavens open, God speaks, and all's good. Thanks be to God.