

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 1 MARCH 2009

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Mark 1: 9-15

“Living Our Baptism”

1. In the television drama *The West Wing*, the story of the lives of staff assisting the US President in the West Wing of the White House, there is a deeply moving scene when the self-deprecating, very ordinary guy Will Bailey is invited to join the President's team. He is a young Californian, a former campaign manager for a small county. He had cautiously offered his speech-writing services to the White House, only for a few weeks, he kept stressing, to research material for the President's inaugural speech. His work and passion so impress the President that he decides to appoint him as Deputy White House Director of Communications & Special Assistant to the President.

Will Bailey the ordinary guy responds only as an ordinary guy can, with disbelief and hesitancy! However, the community around him and his leader meet his cautious faith with an extraordinary invitation:

“There is a promise I ask of everyone who works for me: ‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful and committed citizens can change the world.’” US President
Bartlet, *The West Wing*, Season 4, 15: Inauguration: Over There

However, change means challenges, as Will Bailey learns when he begins his mission and all the staff assigned to his department resign because they resented being overlooked for promotion to his position!

2. This story has similar themes as our story in Mark 1: 9-15 about Jesus' baptism, temptation in the wilderness and the message inviting people to accompany him to change the world.

3. Baptism is a story of ordinary people. Mark presents a Jesus who is ordinary, just one of the crowd coming for baptism. His origins are entirely unremarkable, “a person of “obscure origins, ‘from Nazareth’, tantamount to introducing him as ‘Jesus from Nowheresville’ ... an entirely unremarkable village ... unattested in any ancient source”. (Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, 128)

Then, as Jesus “rises” out of the water upon being baptised, this ordinary, unremarkable human being has a vision in which heaven and earth intersect. No one else experiences these extraordinary events in Mark's version. Mark uses two Old Testament texts to interpret this event. The voice, expressed through an Old Testament text, names Jesus as loved child of God. The Spirit descending on Jesus is an allusion to the Suffering Servant of Isaiah, who gives his life to free humanity from injustice.

In this story of Jesus' baptism, there are signs of the emergence of a new humanity! Jesus, as an ordinary human being, witnesses to the profound intersection of the divine and human, to the worth and value of human life, to grace which pours out into all of life.

This story of Jesus becomes our story when we experience baptism, or when we reflect further on our baptism as a child. This story shapes our belief that God is mysteriously in our midst, redefining and enlisting us in acts of newness and change. It does not seek to enforce an ancient cosmology, of

heaven as a canopy in the sky above us through which God occasionally looks. A theory of heaven that is not vital here. Rather, this is about the God of grace and love who seeks to accompany us in history.

This story suggests that in our baptism we ordinary human beings, children and adults, enter a new identity. In our baptism, we receive an invitation to join in a loving, welcoming community that seeks ongoing change in the church and change in the world.

4. Then, something strange happens in our story. Jesus is driven out into the wilderness to be tempted. Why does this happen just when God affirms him in his person and his being? Surely, this amazing epiphany would be enough to inspire him to change the world.

So why does he go to the wilderness? Because to be truly engaged in changing the world, to truly live a new identity, we need to understand ourselves. If we are to be engaged in change, we need to learn about how and why we resist change. This learning requires an understanding of who we are, and what our desires, fears, and anxieties are. Janet Morley has written a prayer that expresses what this wilderness story is about for us:

“Spirit of integrity,
you drive us into the desert
to search out our truth...” (Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, 10)

Matthew’s story adds actual temptations that Jesus had to face. They were about human tendencies to use power for one’s self, to manipulate God, and boost one’s own ego. Jesus was truly human, and he knew he needed to face his demons, those aspects of himself that could subvert his deepest values.

Our truth refers to what we really are, including the unseen and denied aspects of ourselves, our families and our communities. This means not just our conscious identity, but what unconscious feelings, thoughts and desires exist that influence us. I call these unconscious elements the back page. We all think we know who we are, and are clear about our values and desires.

5. But there is a back page. This back page contains many unseen aspects of ourselves and mental maps and influences that shape us: from our parents, our peers, our society, and our church. Now some desires, directions, influences and self-understanding are valuable. However, some are not. And often grace and unconditional love just cannot get to these secret places. What is more, we do not want to know about this back page. In addition, as Jacques Lacan, the French psychoanalyst who redefined Freud, informs us, we desire not to know about our back page! He wrote that love, hate and ignorance are the three strongest human passions.

Engagement with the events of life can force us to learn about this ignorance and our back page, and to find new solid ground within ourselves.

Let me share a story of how adverse events can lead us into the wilderness, reveal our back page, and produce dynamic change.

In a former congregation where I was a minister, a visitor grabbed the collection off the communion table and tried to run out the front door. An elder tackled him and I ran to support him. To my surprise, the elder became emotional. The person we tackled was startled. Inside the church, all kinds of reactions came to life: anxiety, fear and anger.

I took this person outside. I told him that he was an important person for us and God; that he deserved better from himself; that I did not judge him for what he did but that he was letting himself down; that if he had an addiction he should go to Narcotics Anonymous; and then gave him some of the money from the collection for food and fares only.

I told him we loved him and he was welcome back any time as long as he respected us and did not repeat this act again. He was very emotional, hugged me, thanked me and left.

This event produced chaos. However, it revealed the back page of many church members. I had a range of ongoing conversations, and a few sessions about anger issues and some people chose to work on deeper issues, doing the Enneagram (a Greek word meaning nine points, and is related to the nine personality types which describe each of us), which is a spiritual awareness and growth instrument. (I am a qualified spiritual director in the Enneagram).

This event was a key learning experience for all of us. The conclusion? That person returned to church. After a few months, he and the elder became close friends. That person became a church member and a good friend of the church.

I treated an ordinary person with dignity. I offered him a theology of the grace and unconditional love of God, which included the challenge to change and live differently.

He accepted the invitation and became a member of our community, a group of people who were learning how to work together, to understand their back page, their anger, fears and anxiety and who desired to create a new humanity.

6. Conclusion

In our story in Mark Jesus returns from the wilderness having processed his struggles and doubts. Now he is able confidently to announce a message of God's nearness and invitation to change one's way of life and engage in the coming kingdom of God.

Living our baptism invites us to search out our whole truth; learning about it allows grace and love to enter our back page where dialogue is enabled with the ideas, voices and values in this unconscious space. This needs both time alone and time with others.

This week I was enriched by the visits to some of our church members where I learnt about extended families, values and interests. We are a special community.

This week I was visited by my own extended family experience. In an online-internet conversation my daughter Tania, who lives in London, told me that events in her life had moved her to seek that inner ground. She had finally told her former partner that she wanted to move to Australia with their son Reece. There are complicated reasons for all this, as we parents know. Her former partner was devastated and cried. Little six year-old Reece told her later: "Mummy, it's too hard a choice to make between you and daddy". Tania was devastated. But she knew this wilderness event required her own search for solid inner ground. She and I had read an empowering book a few years ago by Stephanie Dowrick, *Intimacy and Solitude*. She is now re-reading this book to enable her to deal with this situation and with aspects of her unconscious, her back page issues. She shared an insightful quote:

'The experience of self brings a feeling of standing on solid ground inside oneself, on a patch of eternity, which even physical death cannot touch.'

(Stephanie Dowrick, *Intimacy and Solitude*, p 8f.)

Our challenge is to live out our baptism, which means to continue to search out our truth, to learn about our back page and to deal with our anxieties and fears, so that we can learn to create a space that will interest others and, to conclude with the introductory quote, to

‘Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful and committed citizens can change the world.’

We can live our baptism!