

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

BAPTISM OF JESUS

SUNDAY 10 JANUARY 2010

Rev. Vladimir Korotkov

Luke 3: 15-22

"Loved and Named Like No Other"

Introduction

Epiphany, as Bruce Epperly writes,

is the time of the Christian year when we focus on God's surprising revelations – in the magi from another land and faith tradition, in Gentile converts, in strangers and enemies, and, most unexpectedly, in our own lives. The message of Epiphany is that you are God's beloved child and that God is moving in and through your life to bless the world. Epiphany shouts: "Arise, your light has come," and that healing light is emerging from your life and experience. <<http://www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearC/2009-2010/2010-01-10.shtml>>

1. The baptism of Jesus, a surprising new revelation of the self

In this first Sunday of Epiphany, we begin with Luke's story about the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist! Why do we need to remember this story? Why does Jesus seek baptism? What were the surprising revelations experienced by John, Jesus and the people gathered with them?

Firstly, this revelation can't just be reduced to an other-worldly, private, religious experience of Jesus. We Protestants can easily fall into this trap. Our danger is that we narrow baptism to a simple religious event, and miss the additional social, political, cultural, psychological and spiritual dimensions of this event.

John the Baptist, in Matthew's version of this story, does not fully understand what Jesus is doing! Yet in this experience, in the retelling of this event, we are presented with a surprising revelation, one that Jesus would have been surprised by, an epiphany about his human identity, his understanding of his self! You could say, surely Jesus had an identity, a clear sense of his own self, that he knows who he is? But here, I suggest, Jesus is surprised to receive a new revelation of self.

Before we respond to this point, let's examine current views on what the nature of self is and how it is constructed.

2. The private and social construction of the self

In his recent book, *Concepts of the Self*, Anthony Elliot, Professor of Sociology at Flinders University in Adelaide, suggests that the individual forges and sustains a sense of self through the everyday routines of life (2).

In our culture, global communications influence and transform our sense of self. The mass media informs our everyday activities and connections to others. The newspapers influence our self-identification along with consumer identification. For young people, and all of us, we engage in what

Elliot calls a brand loyalty: the products we buy and display and are loyal to.

Consumer identification with media products!

For young people: Nike, the newspapers they read... Giving them a sense of belonging, a sense of solidarity and being the same as... But for church people, we have engaged in our own forms of **brand loyalty**, of social identification: Being Presbyterian, or Methodist, or Congregational, or Anglican, or Evangelicals, or Progressives, and so on! And this is translated into the loyalty to the types of worship we prefer and the songs we sing!

And if we smile when we see young people and think they are too connected to their brands and jeans and iPods and iPhones, let us remember that we too have our “too connected” ways with our brand of faith and brand of worship!

Brand loyalty is incredibly overpowering!

Then, mass media sets our lives within certain events: Where were you when Princess Diana died, or when 9/11 happened; or maybe, do you remember where you were when JFK was assassinated? Or, when WW2 ended? The self, Elliot writes, is increasingly defined with reference to global events, flows, networks (3).

What Elliot attempts to impress on us is that “various social, cultural, political and psychological aspects of the self” shape, reshape and make us who we are. We make choices and are influenced by our world.

This formation of the self is both a *private affair* where we have freedom and express agency, as well as a *structural and cultural affair* in which others, parents and society exert an influence upon us, shaping and forming us.

As a private affair we act “[a]s directors of our own lives, we draw upon emotional frames and desire, as well as wider cultural and social resources, in fashioning the self” (5).

Our self is also shaped by outside influences:

“through the design of other people, the impact of cultural conventions and social practices, or the forces of social processes and political institutions. Society might be said to discipline and regulate the self, so that our deepest feelings about ourselves, as well as our beliefs about our identities, are shaped to their roots by broader social forces and cultural sensibilities.” (5)

Agency, self-shaping and social and structural regulation inform our constructions of our self and identity.

Yet, as a kind of contemporary collective John the Baptist, a range of theorists of the self and society emerged within the 20th century, especially from the 1960s onwards, writes Elliot, promoting a call for transformations in the concept of the self.

They exposed the way selfhood was also produced to exclude, marginalise and displace certain people, those of certain colour, race, gender, class, and sexual orientation. They encouraged the ‘*rewriting of the self*’, of critical reflection to ensure the self was not overpowered and dominated.

And so, they called for a *decentering of the self*, promoting “a suspicion of identity norms, given values, established hierarchies and traditional social practices” (17).

Now such rewriting and decentering is happening all the time. In Saturday’s Age, Lorna Edwards wrote an article, Gen Y @ 30: charmed, tech savvy and ready to take over. (For those who don’t recognise their generations by letters, the Ys are the most materially endowed generation, born between 1980 and 1994, following generation X, born between 1965 and 1980.)

Accustomed to having their voices heard from a young age, they dislike a hierarchical management structure and are collaborative by nature after growing up in the digital age.

[Again, social context has shaped their construction of self! As different contexts shaped their parents and grandparents!]

In Australia, they number a fifth of the population and have managed to delay most of the responsibilities of adulthood by a decade through postponing those rites of passage their parents experienced in their early 20s. They put off or decided not to marry or have children and instead lived at home rent-free between their travels around the world.

Charmed as their childhood might have been, they copped their share of bad press growing up. Inter-generational sniping has labelled them as overindulged children who emerged into the workforce as disloyal, high-maintenance employees not prepared to work long hours to get ahead and unable to cope with their first taste of criticism.

The baby boomers love them - after all, they were the doting parents that raised them.

3. Jesus baptism as a rewriting of his self, his identity.

Returning to our text and the baptism of Jesus, on the basis of Elliot’s suggestions, I interpret Jesus’ experience of baptism as a ***rewriting of his self!***

Or, rather, it involves the writing of additional aspects upon his already constructed self and identity, as well as reconstructing himself! He is named in a way that society could not name him! As we will hear in the weeks to come, in Luke, people, even his family, are confused by what he says and does. Constantly, people asked, who is he? Where does he get his authority?

And the strength and resolve with which he carries out his mission comes from this event of affirming and naming as loved and named and affirmed by God!

He has become free from brand loyalty!

4. What does this mean for us?

In our baptism, we too receive a new self. We are named, loved, affirmed and invited into the intimacy of communion of truth, honesty, grace and love. We have been offered intimacy, companionship and identity like no other has or can offer us. And the love of God is given to us, even before we know it.

As Dorothy McRae McMahon has written:

Jesus, in his baptism was recognized and announced to the people as the beloved son of God. In the Isaiah passage, we listen to a God who says "I have called you by name, you are mine". As people of faith, we believe that we are personally known and loved by God. Humanity is not some anonymous mass of people in the eyes of God, but each one is valued and known. Each journey does matter, each moment of pain and joy is shared by God in ways which are deep and authentic. Each struggle is honoured by God, accompanied as though it is unique and guided by the Holy Spirit. We are never lost in the infinity of universal life.

And this new self, this new loved-ness is a connection, not to a **brand interested** God, but to a God calling us beyond exclusive thinking, feeling and acting, to a constant vigilance and rewriting our self. Then love and belonging and this naming which we share with Jesus can be the key source of who we are and of inclusivity!