

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 19 DECEMBER 2010
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Isaiah 42: 1-9, Psalm 149; Mark 1: 9-13



“Born of Water and Spirit”

Mark tells the story of Jesus’ beginnings soberly and without any of the frills or profound poetry the other gospel writers use. There are no birth stories, wise men, evil kings, angels and shepherds. Even Joseph and Mary don’t appear on the scene. And there is no grand poetic opening like John uses to start his gospel.

The story starts with a quote from the Old Testament, linking the messenger announcing the coming of someone more powerful than he with what the prophets of old envisaged the coming of the Messiah would be like. Then there is Jesus, strolling down to the river from Nazareth to be baptised, just like many others were doing at the time.

Then, suddenly the heavens open.

The first eight verses of this book are a theological statement that is easy to miss for people reading the gospel two thousand years after its inception. At the time this gospel was written people were still making up their minds who the real Messiah was you see, Jesus or John the Baptist. Some were convinced it was John the Baptist, his followers at one stage forming as vigorous a movement as those who were part of the early Church. In some parts of present day Iran and Iraq there are still remnants of that movement to be found. People who believe John the Baptist was the promised Messiah, and whose ways of worshipping, reading and interpreting scripture bear much similarity to ours. John’s message of repentance, his fire and brimstone style of preaching, his ascetic lifestyle and his martyr death appealed to people. Of course. Some will still prefer a Messiah who makes you sweat, who calls you to a life of sober abstinence. Hair shirts and fried locusts and all!

No, says Mark. That’s not where the Holy Spirit comes. This is only preparing the way, no more than getting ready for the real Messiah to arise.

Jesus ambles down from Nazareth and, like everyone else around him, lets himself be submerged by John. That’s the first we hear of him, gently he strolls into the story, without so much as a word. No admonishing sermon is delivered, no outer signs of a holy life mentioned. Just an ordinary man, doing what many others are doing. Seeking forgiveness and renewal. So far nothing out of the ordinary. No fanfare.

Then the heavens open, a dove comes down and a voice speaks. A bird broods over the water. A dove finds a foothold. Words echoing words from the prophets, “Here is my Son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased”, indicate that this is no ordinary man.

It is impossible not to see the connections with some very important and powerful stories. Even those who are not too familiar with scripture will know them. In the beginning, in Genesis one, we find the Holy Spirit brooding over the waters, hovering like a brooding bird, over the primordial soup of chaos and darkness giving birth to light and life when God speaks. Later, in the days of the great flood, it is a dove who finds the first signs of dry land and the waters receding in the story of Noah, and the words that descend from heaven echo the words at the start of a passage in Isaiah 42 that

talks about the coming of a saviour for God's people.

These sentences are not just about the baptism of Jesus. His birth, life, death and resurrection are all there, in those few verses, like they are in, in very different ways, in the opening chapters of all the other gospels.

When he tells us about the waters closing over Jesus' head, Mark testifies that Jesus, from the beginning, is going under with the rest of humanity, joining in its struggle with the overwhelming power of sin and brokenness. What Mark tells us is that Jesus regarded himself part of humanity. Lock, stock and barrel.

If Jesus was capable of sin or not became a big issue in theology later on. For centuries Christian scholars wrestled with this issue, and some of you may have wrestled with it yourself. If Jesus was human, sin must have affected him like it does all of us. But if Jesus was perfect and divine he can't have someone who sinned at the same time.

For me the solution to this issue is right here, in the story about Jesus' baptism. Right here where Jesus without question or reservation presents himself for baptism and joins the rest of humanity in its struggle with sin and brokenness.

By entering the waters of the river Jordan, Jesus indicates that he considers himself to be no different than anybody else. Sin has impacted on his life and he joins the throng of those wishing to be baptised. Brokenness, guilt, pain and suffering that is forever threatening to drown the world, are affecting him like any of us. And to me, living and experiencing sin and brokenness every day like Jesus would have, that makes sense. Even if Jesus was perfect, he would still have been part of the sin and brokenness that permeates our world.

We may believe Jesus knew better than us how to deal with sinfulness and brokenness, that he lived a life that was perfect in its compassion and righteousness. But the pain of seeing people being hurt would have affected him just like us, and like no one else he would have been torn between the understanding of and love for the perpetrator and the anger and compassion for the victim. The feeling of powerlessness when encountering illness and the need beyond our capabilities to care would have affected him, just like us. Even where he was able to perform miracles there were still many who were not touched by his healing powers at the time he travelled around Palestine. If we believe he was truly human he must have felt the helplessness and frustration that comes with that. He must have met bullies and their victims, child abusers and their victims, must have gotten tangled up in a bad break up, and just like us he will have wrestled with the feelings that come with those complex and intricate issues, with living in a broken world.

A boat turned over on the Christmas Island coast would have affected him with the same confusing mix of feelings of helplessness, anger, guilt, sadness, pity, shame and indignation as it has us. Meeting people who have been told, just before Christmas, of all times, that death is near, like happened to me this week, will have filled Jesus with the same helpless rage as it did me. Nothing pure and pious about it. Being confronted with a child covered in bruises will have filled him with the same sadness and anger as it does me. Because I know that Jesus lived a life that was as vulnerable, fragile and human like mine.

Instead of a baby in a stable, Mark talks about a man who is part of what humanity is made of, including the chaos that tears our lives apart at times and threatens to drown us. Including the longing for healing, peace and a better way of living. Instead of the fleeing from Herod as a toddler and the cosmic magic of wise men, Mark tells us about a man who comes for baptism knowing what

the wilderness of life looks like.

Christ goes under, the water closes over his head, and clings to him, as it does to all of us, with its potential of darkness and horror. Showing that he is part of that same world as us, where people are overwhelmed with what comes their way in sadness and grief.

But in the same paragraph in Mark, he rises up, showing that he seeks a life that does not let itself be governed by that black darkness, wanting to live a life that finds its way back through the night. A life that does not give up or give in to the powers of darkness and sin but seeks to overcome them with the help of the Holy Spirit.

As he rises from the water the heavens speak of a vision of life lived faithfully. Bringing forth justice, opening the eyes of the blind, bringing out prisoners from the dungeon, light to those who sit in darkness, a life where the end of former things will come to pass and new things will be declared, just like Isaiah dreamed of.

When we look at the scene in the Icon we have been using, oddly enough, it is not at all the scene Mark paints for us. It's not John the Baptist we see here, breathing fire and brimstone, but women gently washing the little Jesus in the font.

There is not the violence and drama of Jesus being submerged in the primordial waters of creation, or in the waters of the flood that drowned Noah's world. Pictured here are the calm, gentle and cleansing waters that nurture a life of righteousness and love.

It is the future we see, the chaos and darkness contained, the life and light of Christ held by women and men, cared for, so it can grow like the new shoot on the trunk of Jesse we see on the left hand side of the scene.

This man Jesus who rises from the waters of the Jordan in the first chapter of Mark is, from the moment he appears, on his way to a life that will go under and rise again, a life that will mark the beginning of a new creation, of new ground for God's Kingdom to grow.

Mark starts his gospel burying Jesus in the chaos of sin and brokenness that so often threatens to overwhelm us.

It's as if he says: "Come on, follow...." You may feel the water is up over your head at times, you may feel there is too much to cope with, life being too complex to deal with, brokenness and sin too insidious to be ever overcome... But there is one who has shown us that even in the middle of all that, life in the Spirit is possible. That God is brooding over a new creation, that the dove is looking for new ground for the green shoots of new life to grow.

Life in Christ is a life lived in the middle of the turmoil of sin, guilt, pain and suffering. Finding its way to where God's healing and compassionate love descends on it. It is a life where we live in the confidence that the power of evil is contained where people faithfully hold the Christ life, nurturing and caring for it in their corner of the world. Where we persistently refuse to drown, stubbornly look for light and tenaciously care for Christ as he lives in us. Creating new ground for the Spirit of love, compassion and peace to take root. Amen.