

Scripture Readings

Isa 42:1-4

“Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations. ² He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. ³ A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice;⁴ he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope.”

Mark 1:4-11

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: “After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”

Sermon “A Voice Came From Heaven”

During Advent we were reminded of John the Baptist being a “voice” crying out in the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord.” Our reading for today from Mark’s gospel picks up that earlier theme. You should know that Mark’s Gospel is thought to have been at the first of the four to be written. And he starts his good news account of the life of Jesus, *not* with a story of his *birth* - like Matthew and Luke - but with an account of the *baptism* of Jesus. Moreover, Mark begins his gospel announcing, in the very first verse, that Jesus “is the Messiah, the son of God,” making the identity of Jesus abundantly clear to his *readers*. As we will see, he follows that up with a dense, yet brief account of Jesus’ baptism, painting a vivid picture that is full of drama. For Mark, then, Jesus’ *baptism* provides the indispensable context for understanding everything that subsequently is recounted about Jesus’ ministry and passion. Moreover, the backdrop of the wilderness invokes important memories of the exodus for the people of Israel.

Mark’s account also alludes to various rich images from the Old Testament. For example, Mark mentions that “John wore clothing made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist.” This is not a throwaway statement on John’s eccentric habits, but rather John wore clothes similar in to Elijah (see 2 Kings 1:8). Hence Mark is making a connection between John the Baptist and Elijah, a link he makes explicit in Mark 9:13. For Mark, John is a *prophet* and his very life is fulfilling prophetic expectations - making “straight the way of the Lord” for the Messiah who would follow him. The *people* also saw John as a prophet, and his ministry was effective. The Jews were hungry for an authentic word from God, and in John, they heard it.

Part of John’s understanding of “preparing the way of the Lord” was to testify against the corruption within society. We are told elsewhere that John understood, just like many Jews of the day, that the Messiah would come as a *judge*. Consequently, people felt dirty, unclean, unholy and were desperate to put themselves right with God. John, therefore, proclaimed repentance, baptism, and forgiveness of sins. Repentance means a radical turning around in our thinking and behaviour, and going in the opposite direction. The term was used to indicate both a personal turning away from sin and Israel’s corporate turning away from idolatry and back to worshipping God. We know from later on that John was somewhat surprised by the way Jesus’ ministry was *not* that of judgment. But that is leaping too far ahead into the story, but it is important - in order to appreciate John’s mindset.

Baptism is plunging people into water; in John’s case, the River Jordan! Within the wider Jewish tradition of ritual washing and bathing, John’s baptism was not one ritual among others, but as a unique moment of repentance, preparing them for the coming of the kingdom of God. Only those who actively turn back to God will experience God’s reign as a time of lasting peace, says John. The same is still true today. We must entrust ourselves to God’s living Word, Jesus, and to turn away from all those voices that are calling us to walk on some other path.

Let's focus on Mark's powerful and profound portrayal of Jesus' baptism for a moment:

¹⁰Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

The baptism of Jesus by John is four things: a moment of *decision*; John's ministry was a sign that Jesus was to leave Nazareth and become an itinerant rabbi. It was a moment of *identification*; although Jesus didn't need to repent from sin, he wanted to be identified with John's renewal movement of people coming back to God. It was a moment of *equipping* by the Holy Spirit. The dove is a symbol of gentleness, perhaps in contrast to John's message of judgment; Jesus will conquer, but it will be a conquest of love. It was also a moment of *approval*, in this case approval by God speaking directly to Jesus himself. Let us explore this latter aspect a little further.

First, the vision; what did Jesus see?

"He saw the heavens in the process of being ripped apart." The text implies this was an act of God and the same verb is used of the Temple curtain, which is torn in two from top to bottom when Jesus died (see Mark 15:38). In both cases what had been sealed was suddenly flung open. Mark uses words reminiscent of Isaiah 64:1 - "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." Mark's language not only speaks of prophetic expectations being fulfilled, but its wording provides seed for the future doctrine of the incarnation: God comes in human form. The heavens being ripped open, then, implies *this* particular baptism is an event of cosmic significance, and shows that the veiled mystery of God is now been made manifest and freely available. It is an *epiphany*. The great theologian Karl Barth puts it this way: "It is *astonishing* to claim that God does not remain hidden in the heights of heaven, but descends to the depths of earthly life in order to be seen and heard by finite creatures." This shocking claim is the essence of Mark's gospel. Like the vision of Jacob's ladder (in Gen 28:10-19), it presents a picture in which God is not distant and remote, but close by. God is busy and active; it is just that he is hidden from our sight. The "heavens tearing apart," then, allows Mark's readers – you and me - to see into the very workings of what God wants to do in the world.

Then there is an audio track; what did Jesus hear?

The voice from heaven, like John's preaching, affirms that Jesus is radically different. John the Baptist continues in the line of prophets in the pattern of Elijah, but Jesus is of another order of greatness. He is the beloved son of God, whose relationship with the Father is altogether right and pleasing. Again, Mark uses words connected with Isaiah, words that were our Old Testament reading for today that refer to the suffering servant of God: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa 42:1). And also words from the psalmist: "He said to me, "You are my son; today I have begotten you" (Ps 2:7),

which originally referred to a Davidic King, and could be reinterpreted as messianic. Mark's claim that Jesus is the Messiah is confirmed by the descent of the Holy Spirit. The way Mark presents the baptism of Jesus is therefore central for understanding the rest of his gospel, which is - above all - the story of Jesus and what God did through him.

In Mark, unlike the other gospels, both the vision and voice are intended for Jesus alone. Nothing in the text suggests that others present saw or heard anything. Therefore the *readers* have been informed of the true identity of Jesus in Mark 1:1 and now in his baptismal epiphany. At the level of the narrative, then, this truth so far is only known to Jesus. This is therefore a *secret* Epiphany. Jesus knows who he is by means of an experience that is not accessible to objective, public verification. Others must discover this truth by listening to what Jesus says and by watching what he does. Later, in Mark 7:9, "this is my son, the beloved" is repeated at the Transfiguration. This title is apparently so dangerous that unclean spirits who recognize Jesus' identity must be kept quiet (Mark 3:11; 5:7). The centurion, as he watches Jesus die, (see Mark 15:39) will publicly confess what here is revealed privately, namely that Jesus is the Messiah, the son of God. That is why the baptism of Jesus matters.

And that is why *our* baptism matters. The four things mentioned earlier, *decision, identification, equipping, and approval*, remain a feature of Christian baptism.

Just as for Mark, the baptism of Jesus establishes *his* identity, so for Paul, the baptism of believers establishes *our* identity. Jesus is who God says he is. We *are* also who *God says we are*, namely, through baptism we are in Jesus Christ; we are sons and daughters of God. (Gal 3:26-27). The young Martin Luther had agonising doubts as to his identity as a forgiven child of God, which were eventually addressed by focusing on this profound meaning of baptism. When God looks at every baptized, believing Christian he says to us what he said to Jesus on that day. Sometimes this seems impossible, especially for those people who never had that kind of support from their earthly parents, but it's true: God looks at us and says, "you are, my dear, dear child. I am delighted with you." Try saying that sentence slowly, with your own name at the start, and reflect quietly on what God is saying to you. (Pause.) A good deal of the Christian faith is a matter of learning to live in this new reality, even when we can't see it or feel it. Learn to hear these words addressed to yourself, and let them change you, and mold you into the person that God wants you to be. Our life then becomes a journey of faith in which we ever more fully enter into our baptismal identity and we become participants in the life and love of the Trinity, in whose name we are baptized. Amen.