

Scripture Readings for 10th January 2021

Mark 1:4-11 (NIV)

⁴And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵The 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. ⁶John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷And 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. ⁸I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

⁹At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. 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."

Acts 19:1-7 (NIV)

¹⁹While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples ²and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?"

They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit."

³So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?"

"John's baptism," they replied.

⁴Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." ⁵On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

⁶When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. ⁷There were about twelve men in all.

Sermon: By Water and the Spirit

We are now beginning the season of Epiphany; it's a word that means "revelation" or "manifestation," a mystery is being made plain. In a Christian context, "epiphany" implies a *divine* revelation; what is being revealed is beyond human intuition or logic. In other words, it's not something we can figure out on our own. Last week we celebrated the story of the magi who came and worshiped the Christ-child and presented their gifts. Through that account, Jesus is revealed as the saviour of the *whole* world. This week we will consider the baptism of Jesus, an event that took place about 30 years later. It is another epiphany; something very special is being disclosed. But what exactly is it? And I also want to consider our 2nd reading from Acts and relate that to Christian baptism in general, and therefore what might it mean for you and me today.

You may recall that at the beginning of Advent, we were reminded of John the Baptist being a "voice" crying out in the wilderness, proclaiming "Prepare the way of the Lord."¹ For Mark, John the Baptist was an Elijah-like prophet,² a man with a mission of preaching "repentance"³ and accompanied by a distinctive ritual washing performed in the River Jordan. According to Mark, Jesus was more than a prophet, he was "the Messiah, the Son of God,"⁴ which is a different order of greatness altogether. Mark also makes this *specialness* clear through the words of John the Baptist, who says: "After me comes the One more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. *I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.*" All the other gospel writers make the same point.⁵ Mark also relates that *after* Jesus' baptism⁶ something surprisingly dramatic was revealed which demonstrated Jesus is God's Chosen One – the Messiah - and *that's the epiphany!* Mark describes it this way: "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. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'"⁷ What does this mean?

¹ Mark 1:3, citing Isa 40:3. See also: John 1:19-28; Luke 3:1-9; Matt 3:1-6. In Isa 40:3, the 'road' was for the LORD, God himself. Here, John is preparing for the LORD's anointed: Jesus. (Even so, the use of "Lord" (*kyrios*) here is probably a christological hint.) See: <https://securerusercontent.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Here-is-Your-God.pdf>.

² Mark 1:6; 9:13. See: 2 Kings 1:8. The camel's hair is a bit of a mystery, but maybe John was a hairy man or, perhaps, didn't cut his hair – a sign of a Nazarite vow (cf. Luke 1:15; Num 6:1-21; Judges 13:2-5).

³ See Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3 – they both have "preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Matthew 3:5-6, 11a only has "preaching a baptism of repentance" – *not* forgiveness, and I suggest this difference is important (See also Acts 19:4. For Jews at that time, only *God* could forgive sins and that was through sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. In fact, Jesus, just prior to his healing of a paralyzed man, was later accused of *blasphemy* by some religious leaders for claiming to be able to forgive sins; Matt 9:1-8; Mark 2:5-7; Luke 5:17-26.) At the end of his Gospel, Matthew explicitly links *forgiveness* with the *death of Jesus* using the familiar words of Jesus at the Last Supper, where he instigates the practice of Holy Communion saying: "Drink from [this cup], all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins* (Matt 26:27-28).

⁴ Mark 1:1. In the 1st century, "Son of God" was effectively synonymous with "Messiah," *not* as the 2nd person of the Trinity.

⁵ Mark 1:7-8. See also Matt 3:11-12; Luke 3:16-17 (they add "and fire" which indicates "judgement"), and John 1:26-34.

⁶ I suggest this baptism signifies a public act of submission and obedience to God—rather than of repentance in the case of Jesus. Moreover, Jesus is expressing his solidarity with the people he came to save and *not* with the religious elite who didn't think they needed to repent!

⁷ Mark 1:10-11. Matt 3:16 and Luke 3:21 is less dramatic ("heaven was opened") but the divine link with "heaven" is clear.

First, Jesus saw the heavens in the process of being ripped apart. This wording implies this was an act of God and the same Greek verb is used of the Temple curtain that was torn in two from top to bottom when Jesus died.⁸ In both cases what had been sealed was suddenly flung open, and what was hidden was being revealed.⁹ All this imagery is reminiscent of Isaiah 64:1, which says: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”¹⁰ This language not only speaks of prophetic hopes being fulfilled, but its wording even provides seed for the future doctrine of the incarnation: God himself coming 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’s an epiphany! The noted 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.”¹¹ This shocking claim is the essence of all the gospel writers. Like the vision of Jacob’s ladder,¹² it presents a picture in which God is not distant or disinterested, but close by. God is busy and active; it is just that he is hidden from our sight. The “heavens tearing apart,” then, allows us to catch a glimpse into the very workings of what God wants to do in the world through Jesus.

Second, there is a sign of God’s empowering Spirit coming upon Jesus “like a dove.”¹³ This indicates that God’s coming judgement will *not* be achieved through a harsh, vengeful spirit,¹⁴ but by making peace. And that gives us a surprising hint of the *kind* of Messiah Jesus will be – he is instigating a peaceful revolution. This mention of “dove-like” should not take the focus away from the Spirit descending on him, which is a common Old Testament expression¹⁵ that signifies Jesus is a divinely-authorized prophet. But what happens next points to something more. . . .

Third, all this is accompanied by a divine voice from heaven saying, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”¹⁶ He is the beloved son of God whose relationship with the Father is *unique*. This proclamation echoes the words from Isaiah 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.”¹⁷ Moreover, that public affirmation from heaven is reminiscent of

⁸ See Mark 15:38.

⁹ In addition, at the end of the dramatic opening chapter of John’s gospel, Jesus says to Nathanael: “Very truly I tell you, you will see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man, John 1:51.”

¹⁰ See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/From-Why-to-Waiting-in-Hope.pdf> .

¹¹ Cited in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol 1. (Westminster, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 238.

¹² See Gen 28:10-19.

¹³ Mark 1:10; Matt 3:16; Luke 3:22; John 1:32. See also Isa 11:1-5; 42:1.

¹⁴ John the Baptist understood, just like many Jews of the day, that the Messiah would come as a judge. See also [5].

¹⁵ John 1:32; Matt 3:16.

¹⁶ Matt 3:17. Mark 1:11 gives the impression that the words from heaven were *only* heard by Jesus. Later, in Mark 9:7, “this is my son, the beloved” is repeated at the Transfiguration and witnessed by Peter, James, and John.

¹⁷ Isa 42:1. Citing a verse like this is not an isolated proof-text to make a point; rather it points to a whole passage containing a relevant theme for the readers to recall—as Matthew later makes explicit (See Matt 12:17–21, where he cites Isa 42:1-4.)

words from the psalmist: “He said to me, ‘You are my son; today I have begotten you,’”¹⁸ which originally referred to a Davidic King and could be reinterpreted as messianic. Since Mark’s gospel doesn’t have a birth narrative and instead begins with the baptism of Jesus, this event is central for understanding the rest of *his* gospel, which is—above all—the story of Jesus and what God did through him.

The baptism of Jesus by John, then, can be summarized as four things: It is a moment of *decision*; this was a sign that Jesus was to leave Nazareth and become an itinerant rabbi. It was a moment of *identification*; Jesus wanted to be identified with John the Baptist’s renewal movement of people coming back to God. It was also his special moment of *equipping* by the Holy Spirit for ministry. And it was a moment of *approval*, in this case, an affirmation by God speaking directly to Jesus himself.

Moving on to our second reading from Acts, there we read of a strange encounter at Ephesus in the early 50’s AD. Missionary Paul discovers some “disciples” there and it appears that through talking with them, he senses something significant is missing in their theology.¹⁹ So Paul asks them an open-ended question: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”²⁰ And they hadn’t a clue what he meant. So Paul then asks, “What baptism did you receive?” “John’s baptism,” they replied.²¹ Paul then realizes what is missing.

John’s baptism, as I mentioned earlier, is one of *repentance*; it’s a U-turn, a reorientation of one’s life back to following God. It is more than “confession” in that repentance is a call to think (and behave) differently. But you will also recall what Mark tells us through the words of John the Baptist, namely, that *he* baptized with water, but the One who came after him – Jesus – would baptize *with the Holy Spirit*.²² Unfortunately, Mark does not expand on what that means at any point in his gospel! However, in John’s Gospel we read that in a post-resurrection appearance, Jesus said to the disciples, “Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so I send you . . . receive the Holy Spirit.”²³ This was *their* special commissioning for ministry. Luke presents his version of that commissioning experience as occurring later, at Pentecost, and explicitly refers to this as being “baptized with the Holy Spirit.”²⁴ Matthew puts it in a different way too. He has Jesus commissioning his followers saying, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”²⁵ Combining all this

¹⁸ Ps 2:7.

¹⁹ This passage also affirms Paul’s own authority with respect to Apollos; see Acts 18:24-19:7.

²⁰ Acts 19:2.

²¹ Acts 19:3. See also Acts 8:14-17 for a similar experience of Peter and John in Samaria. See also Acts 10:44-48.

²² See Mark 1:8.

²³ John 20:21-22.

²⁴ See Luke 24:49 and Acts 1:4; 2:1-4.

²⁵ Matt 28:18-20. Note that this trinitarian baptismal formula is also in the *Didache*, 7.1 (see: <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/richardson/fathers.viii.i.iii.html>), and was possibly written before Matthew’s gospel, which itself is thought to have been written about 80-90 CE. Matthew also uses the phrase, “in the name of,” which means “in the

together, and adding further insights from Paul's letters, we can see that the early Church's theology of baptism was evolving in light of Jesus' teaching and their own experiences. It still incorporated John's water baptism of repentance, but they also merged it with this commissioning and empowering experience of the Holy Spirit. When we practice Christian baptism today, and perhaps especially with infant baptism, we are mesmerised by the *physical* activity of splashing water - and wondering if the baby will cry - that we overlook the important aspect of a *spiritual* new beginning and the ongoing work of God's Spirit.

Going back to Paul at Ephesus for a moment; there are two things to note. First, there were disciples of John the Baptist even in Turkey – which shows how effective and enduring John's ministry was! Second, these disciples of John were subsequently baptized in the name – or in the authority - of the risen Lord Jesus. And when Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them in demonstrable, public ways, further equipping them for ministry.²⁶ This kind of scenario wasn't unique, and Luke relates other examples earlier in the Book of Acts. There is much more I could say here, but I'll leave it at that for the present. (If you have questions, feel free to email me.)

The key point is that Christian baptism is far more than a religious "rite of passage." It is a *sign of new birth* of water *and* the Spirit. Those four things I mentioned earlier summarizing Jesus' baptism are still applicable to us. Christian baptism is a moment of conscious *decision to follow God's ways*, whether by the parents of a child - in the case of infant baptism, or by the grown-up for adult baptism. It is moment of *identification with - and welcome into - the world-wide community of Christians*, that is why we baptise publicly and in the context of worship. It is also a moment *equipping by the Holy Spirit for service*, and the Spirit's work continues to *transform* our lives as we partner with him. And it is a moment of divine *approval* because baptism is a sign of being adopted into *God's family*. Just as for Mark, the baptism of Jesus establishes *his* identity as the Messiah, so the Christian baptism 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!²⁷

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. Our life is, then, 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 were baptized. That is the divine mystery that we are being reminded of in this season of Epiphany. As we begin a New Year, I encourage us all to recall our own baptism and explore the richness of its meaning once again. And let us recommit ourselves to following the Jesus-way, empowered by the Spirit. Amen.

authority of" (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Incidentally, the phrase "I am with you always, to the end of the age" needs to be compared with the parting words of Moses: "For the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you," Deut 31:6; see also Josh 1:9. The key difference being Jesus substituting "the LORD" with himself, which only makes sense in light of the earlier sentence: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

²⁶ See Acts 19:6. see also [21].

²⁷ Gal 3:26-27. See also: <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/On-Baptism.pdf> .