

A Sermon for The Baptism of Christ, Jan 10 2021

The Gospel of St Mark is not as poetic and flowery as that of the Gospel of St John. St Mark's Gospel is short, dramatic and factual. It does not fixate on making the case for Jesus being the Messiah, as St Matthew's Gospel does, for a Jewish audience. Mark's Gospel *does* make the case, more than adequately, for Jesus being the Messiah, but it is written for non-Jews (as well as Jews).

The Gospel of St Mark is not some sort of historical or semi-biographical account, as is the Gospel of St Luke. Yet, within a sentence or two of its beginning, Jesus' life and ministry is grounded in the past predictions of Isaiah for the future, which are coming to pass in the here-and-now. The oldest Gospel, St Mark's Gospel, has clearly inspired others, who borrow from this source widely, yet, it has something for everyone: a Gospel for all peoples, at all times.

Today, in the season of Epiphany, we see St Mark's Gospel do two things, brilliantly. In its retelling of the account of the Baptism of Jesus, we not only hear the history of a particular occasion in the life of a particular man - Joshua bar Joseph of Nazareth - we also hear how this occasion is *yet another moment in time when God directly intervenes in human history, making Himself known in the process*. And note, not just for the Jews, but for all humanity.

The second thing Mark's Gospel makes clear is that this is the *beginning of a story*. This is the start of Mark's Gospel; and Mark makes it clear that the Baptism of Jesus is the beginning of something big, the beginning of something important – the beginning of Jesus' ministry.

At this point, perhaps we should remember that Mark's Gospel starts abruptly when Jesus is already an adult, and that it ends very abruptly too. Perhaps this indicates that the Gospel is *unfinished*, and that we are witnesses to the continued writing of this Gospel, witnesses to the interaction of God with humanity in our time, as well as inheritors of the witnesses around the world in the decades and centuries that were to follow.

And in a way, that's what Baptism for us too is all about. It's about an ongoing relationship with God, which never ends. It's not really about getting a tick in some Heavenly register, so that people who have never been baptised will forever be treated differently from others who have gone through the rite. When you get to the Pearly Gates, of popular imagination, you won't be asked to produce your Baptism Certificate so that you can join the fast track cue for processing!

St Augustine, who wrote a great deal about sin (and he knew more than many on the subject, from his early life!) spoke of "Original Sin" being passed down to us from Adam and Eve; this was his explanation for why humans continue to do things which are not in their own interest, and not what God would want for us. His harsh doctrine, which made life so much more difficult for so many, was, as is so often the case, taken up with gusto. Put up a fence and humans will move heaven and earth to find out what is on the other side, even if there's nothing there. Threaten to close a shop, and all of a sudden,

hundreds will descend, as though they had been there week-in, week-out for decades. Show human beings a choice between a difficult path and an easier one, and you'll get a whole bunch of people making lives difficult for themselves.

In mediaeval times the doctrine of Original Sin was interpreted, and reinterpreted, until it eventually became "No baptism, no place in Heaven". The appalling consequence of this is that in St Augustine's, St Peter's and probably every other churchyard of any age, anywhere, there will be a section where babies were buried who didn't live long enough to be baptised. Separated from their families forever. This is why rapid, Emergency Baptism by lay people, such as midwives, became important. The child would have had water poured on to them and the lay officiant would quickly say, "I baptise you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen", followed by the Lord's Prayer and/or The Grace, if there was time. No certificates or candles. No fonts, no Presentation or Godparents – just stripped down to the bare bones of an act of *wanting* to be in a relationship with Christ, or parents (on their child's behalf) wanting this to be the case, in a recreation of the events described by St Mark in chapter 1 of his Gospel this morning. As with people on their death beds who are unable to swallow any of the elements of Holy Communion, the very act of wishing to be one with Christ is as effective, *in extremis*, as going through the rite itself.

And for those of us who get to live beyond infancy (and for most of the human race since time began, we are perhaps the minority), that ongoing relationship with Christ, that started at our baptism, and modelled by Jesus in today's Gospel, is important *to maintain, and to develop*. Our ongoing relationship with God is not a static thing. It will be full of ups and downs. That's life.

But God is more forgiving than the hard-line teachings of some theologians. Look back to the stinking stable in Bethlehem. Look back to the race out of Judea to avoid the squads of soldiers sent in to kill a baby boy. Our God knows what it is to be human, and is far more understanding of us than we would ever be to one another, if we human beings were left in charge of Judgement.

So every now and again it is useful to *renew our baptism vows*, just as it is important to re-read or re-hear a Gospel passage. Once is not enough, because we are flawed creatures. Pouring water onto our heads at the moment of our birth does not mean that we are sinless thereafter, for the rest of our lives. In 1889, Hitler was baptised, but did not remain sinless – indeed he used his self-stated membership of the church (although he never attended past 1904, it seems) as cover for political advantage and unspeakable acts of evil. A real relationship with God, renewed regularly, is what God wants for us all: not a pretence; not a showy act; not a once in a lifetime rite.

In today's Gospel account, Jesus models baptism for us as something special and important that brings Heaven and Earth, God and man, together in a new relationship. But immediately after baptism, Jesus heads off to further build on that relationship with the God who acknowledges and loves Him, and thereafter, to put God's teachings in the hearts of others - for the betterment of us all. Today perhaps we should consider renewing our baptismal vows in one-to-one conversation with God, in prayer. Amen.