

Baptism of Christ Year B 2021

The morning of the first day. The beginning of the beginning. Wind and water. Light and darkness. Heaven and earth. It feels so quiet, so gentle. Like the opening bars of a piece of music which will grow and swell, develop and rise until a few instruments become a great orchestra rushing towards its exuberant crescendo - the end of the beginning - and God saw that it was good.

The Spirit hovered over the water just as it hovers over the little community of disciples in Ephesus. Paul comes and asks the question 'Did you receive the Spirit?' and they feign ignorance. 'We only received the baptism of John', they reply. But John had preached about one coming after him who would baptise not with water but with the Holy Spirit. So are these disciples of John or of Jesus? Perhaps a bit of both. They had heard of Jesus and wanted to follow him, but knew only John's baptism of repentance. They had not yet learned that John's baptism of repentance had to be followed by baptism into Christ through the coming of the Holy Spirit. These Ephesians, a long way away from the Jordan and long after John had been murdered, nevertheless recognised the authenticity of his call to

repentance and were, therefore, open to Paul's preaching - and, we are told, the Holy Spirit came upon them with power. And when the Spirit comes, she brings gifts - service, teaching, giving, mercy, leadership, healing, miracles, pastoral care, intercession, discernment, wisdom - to name but a few. Our problem is that we often don't recognise those gifts either in others but especially in ourselves. 'Oh, I couldn't possibly do that' we say when asked to take up a role, a task, a job - whatever you call it. I would call it a ministry. 'I couldn't possibly do that' - false modesty, genuine modesty, fear of being 'up-front', or of being seen as self- important (and therefore open to criticism). Tell me about it

But actually when you finally give in and accept that, for some unfathomable reason, you have been given a gift - a gift to use - saying YES is liberation - at least you can stop arguing with God - who surely will win in the end, even if only through sheer persistence.

The Holy Spirit comes into our lives just once, at baptism - the joy is that she never goes away, no matter how much we try to ignore her presence. Time and again we get prompted, empowered, rescued, restored - thank God for that.

We thought about the beginning of the beginning - and now there is a new beginning - the Word God speaks is made flesh, and as a young man comes to the Jordan. This coming will signal a new creation. John comes as prophet, a sign of renewal and restoration. The story of John the Baptist is in all four Gospels, but only John the Evangelist tells us that John the Baptist was baptising at Bethany, on the far side of the Jordan, and so, according to the John account, to be baptised by the Baptist you had to cross the river, thus leaving behind you the promised land, and then, having left, you had to repent and be baptised before you could re-enter the promised land. A new beginning, a fresh start, another attempt to build the nation which God had had in mind, from the beginning. And as the people make this journey, promise themselves (and God) that things will change, someone they don't know rises from the water - and it happens. Heaven and earth meet - collide - are present to each other - and above the music of the orchestra of the new creation there comes a solo voice. 'You are my son, the beloved. With you I am well pleased.' Gosh, when did anyone last say that last bit to you? Or when did you last say that to someone else? Can you imagine God saying to you 'You are my dear, dear child. I am delighted with

you'. Try reading this slowly, taking it in. God saying he delights in you - perhaps not as you are, but as you could be, if only, if only....

Put your name at the beginning of that sentence and reflect on what God is saying to you, day after day.

We are told that at his baptism Jesus saw the heavens open - that doesn't mean a door in the sky swing back giving him a little glimpse of what is beyond. 'Heaven' in the Bible, means God's dimension as opposed to our ordinary reality. It is as if an invisible curtain is suddenly pulled back and we are standing in the presence of a different reality altogether.

The practice of our faith is a matter of learning to live by this different reality even when we can't see it - which is probably most of the time. Just occasionally you may be blessed enough to catch sight or sound (or even smell) of that reality, but most of the time we walk by faith, not by sight.

The way that Mark constructs his Gospel, with its emphasis on commitment, immediate commitment - is his call to us to see and to hear, in the story of Jesus, the heavenly vision, the heavenly voice. Learn to hear these words and address them to yourselves, and let them change you, mould you, make you somebody new - the person God wants you to be, the person God knows you could

be, if only you would try. Discover in this story the heavenly dimension of *God's* world, normally hidden. That discovery will equip you for the wilderness, for temptation, for whatever lies ahead. 'You are my child, my beloved child. With you I am well pleased'. How wonderful is that!