

Sermon for Romsey/Lancefield

11th of January, 2009

Mark 1:4-11

Genesis 1:1-5

One of the things that I did this week at NCYC, the National Christian Youth Convention, was attend a bible study session on Mark's gospel led by Alistair Macrae, the President-Elect of the Uniting Church, and Kylie Crabbe, a candidate for ministry who's doing a PhD in biblical studies. As part of the session, they got a delegate to come to the front of the room and put events from the Gospel of Mark into chronological order. Things like deciding whether the Transfiguration came before or after the feeding of the 5000; when Jesus called his first disciples; that sort of thing. One of the events listed was "the shepherds and the wise men visit Jesus in the stable". Of course, the delegate did what 90% of Christians would do – and put this event as the very first one in the gospel. She only changed her mind after a handful of us began to yell loudly that it was a trick question. There is no nativity in Mark. No baby, no stable, neither shepherds nor magi. Mark's gospel starts with John in the wilderness and the first time we see Jesus is as an adult coming to John to be baptised. Today's reading is the beginning of the gospel. Today's reading is Mark's Christmas story – the beginning of God's new plan of salvation for humanity, the entry of God into the world in a new way. Mark's story of Jesus' baptism is a story of the dawning of a new day.

The story is full of Old Testament imagery. John is in the wilderness, a place of testing for the people of Israel who wandered for forty years in the desert after their liberation from Egypt. Because of that liberation experience the wilderness is also a place of beginnings, and of journeying with God. Immediately after his baptism, Jesus will be driven into the wilderness by the Spirit to experience his own testing, and after that testing he will be waited upon by angels. The story is one of water, as well as wilderness; and water too is Old Testament imagery. The creation story tells of a world covered in water and darkness, before the Spirit swept over the face of the waters and creation began. Water is a gift to people wandering in the desert, but it's also chaotic, frightening. To enter the water is to risk drowning, to face death. The people John baptises symbolically die and are reborn. This is what Jesus does, too, when he enters the water. In solidarity with humanity, at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus faces death. At the end of his ministry he will face death again, but then it will not only be symbolic.

After his baptism, as he emerges from the water, Jesus sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove upon him. The separation between God and humanity is violently overcome with the ripping apart of the heavens, and gently overcome with the descent of a bird. In Jesus, God enters into human history. This is why today's reading is Mark's Christmas story. It's the story of the incarnation, of the coming of God in the person of Jesus. The world is a different place because of Jesus – a barrier separating God from creation has been torn away. Here the heavens are torn open; at the time of Jesus' death the curtain of the temple will be torn. Isaiah called to God: "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down".¹ In Jesus, God has done just that. God has come to live among us; as the Nativity stories of other gospels tell us. In Jesus we are seeing Emmanuel – God-With-Us.

In response to Jesus' baptism God speaks: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." We might ask *why* God is pleased. Jesus has not yet begun his ministry. He has not yet called any disciples and taught them, he hasn't healed the sick or exorcised demons. He's a long way from his final act of obedience on the cross. Yet the first words that we hear God speak to Jesus are of recognition and delight. Jesus' baptism is symbolic of everything that's going to happen. Jesus' baptism is an example of the obedience, humility and sacrifice that shapes the course

¹ Isaiah 64:1.

of Jesus' life, ministry and death. John says of Jesus that: "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals." And yet Jesus, like all the others who come from Jerusalem and the whole Judean countryside, comes to enter the water and be baptised by John. Being baptised by someone else was a highly unusual procedure. Ritual baths and immersions were common enough, but to allow someone *else* to immerse you added a whole new level of submission and obedience. It was so unusual that John was known as 'the baptiser' because he did it. By being baptised by John in the Jordan, Jesus demonstrates for the first time his obedience to God; the obedience that will continue till his death on the cross.

Jesus' baptism is an act of solidarity with humanity; when we are baptised we know that we follow in his footsteps. We also follow in his footsteps by being loved by God. God's words of recognition and love addressed to Jesus as he emerges from the water are also addressed to us when we emerge from the waters of baptism, and continue to be true throughout our lives and into our deaths, just as they continued to be true for Jesus. Like Jesus, we are also God's beloved children. God is also well-pleased in us, in our very existence, because God created us and loves us. Just as God looked on all the elements of creation and saw that they were good, so God looks at us, each of us part of his creation, and sees that we are good.

Of course, our *behaviour* is often very far from good. We often do things that separate us from God, and we need to repent, to redirect ourselves, to turn again to face God, to confess our sins as the people of Jerusalem and the Judean countryside did as they were baptised in the Jordan. We can do that knowing that we are loved by God, and that there is no doubt that God will forgive us. We can do that because just as through Jesus God entered into the life of all humanity, so through our baptism we entered into the life of Christ and were acknowledged as God's beloved children. When we were baptised we were baptised into Christ Jesus, into his life and into his death. With our baptism, we died to sin, to the old ways that didn't work, and began new lives. Jesus was baptised in obedience to God; in our baptism we joined him in that obedience. We too began new lives. And we continue to live those new lives every day, following Jesus to the best of our ability, falling sometimes and failing, but knowing that God will pick us up again and set us on our feet so that we can continue to follow Christ. Baptism, William Willimon says, is a once and for all sacrament that takes our whole lives to complete. Today, as we celebrate Jesus' baptism in solidarity with us, let's once again commit ourselves to live out our baptisms in solidarity with him, as God's beloved children in whom God is well pleased. Amen.