

Hope and the waters of baptism

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 3 January, 2021

A Contemporary Reflection by Warren Talbot

Baptism of Jesus B

Genesis 1: 1-5; Mark 1: 4-11

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Good morning – or whatever time of day it is when you are joining us for our online gathering. We are in Year B of the church’s calendar, and this year we follow the testimony, the good news, according to the Markan community. Written about 40 years after the death of Jesus, Mark’s Gospel is the first we have in the Scriptures. It is also the shortest.

The Markan writer is in a hurry. Jesus is on the way to the Cross. There are no infancy narratives and alleged family trees, as in Matthew and Luke, and no philosophical reflection as we heard last Sunday from the Prologue from John’s Gospel.

But there is an important encounter with John the Baptist, which in many ways sets the tone for the rest of the Gospel. Let’s hear the text now, and then we will reflect on some of the major themes.

If you haven’t already, now is a very good time of the year to sit down and read Mark’s Gospel in a single sitting. It will only take you about two hours!

Our reading today commences at the fourth verse of the first chapter...

“John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness.....

After Christmas, I spent a few days with a friend around Jervis Bay on NSW’s south coast. The weather was drizzly and overcast, so lots of time for talking and reading. One morning, the sun arrived, and we headed to one of the beaches in the Booderee national park.

Sitting on the white sand at Iluka beach, I just had to remove my prosthetic leg, crawl into the ocean, sit there and be rocked around by the salty water. It was a baptism of sorts.

500 million years ago, early forms of life crawled from the ocean and evolved into millions of diverse and wonderful life forms, including Homo sapiens. Bill Loader has written that:

“Water has done the hard work: softening, washing, refreshing, sometimes under pressure, changing and reshaping things. Water has shaped continents, carved out great gorges and dug deep valleys. It rises and falls endlessly in the cycle of vapour and falling rain. Sometimes it hides deep within the earth’s crust waiting for future discovery. “

It is no wonder that water has been a symbol of the life, hope and depth we name when we speak of God, or Divine Presence, or the Spirit of Life. Water has always been an essential part of Mother Earth, and it is not surprising that water has played an important role in human religious awareness and religious rituals.

Ritual cleansing was an essential part of the Jewish religion and would have been familiar to the family and friends of Jesus. But the baptism practised by John was not ritual cleansing. It was a call for radical renewal and a forgiveness of sins.

John was baptising in the river Jordan, away from Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the centre of religious power based in the Temple. In Jewish mythology, the river Jordan represented the final crossing from slavery in Egypt, to freedom and liberation in the Promised Land.

The people of Palestine in the time of John were far from free, oppressed by the Roman military occupation, with Rome supported by the Temple authorities who collaborated with the power of Imperial rule. John was a threat to this collaboration and, as we read later in the Gospels, was executed for his rebellion.

It is significant, therefore, that Jesus comes to John to be baptised. In so doing Jesus identifies himself with John's radical message and sets his own life on a collision course with both Rome and the Temple authorities. The baptism can be seen as a fundamental part of Jesus' emerging sense of vocation, and the shape of his life and teaching.

There is wide agreement amongst biblical scholars that there is a historical basis to this story. John Dominic Crossan states that the baptism of Jesus by John is one of the few things we can be sure of when talking about both John and Jesus. The narrative is found in the three synoptic gospels.

It would have been easier, or at least tempting, for the Gospel writers to exclude the story from their good news. Why would the Christ, the messenger of messianic hope, need to be baptized by a prophet in the Judean wilderness? The early Christ communities retained this story, reminding us, among other things, of the humanity of Jesus.

What are we to make of the heavens being torn apart, a dove descending and the literal voice of God speaking from the heavens? We know that the Gospels are not history or biography, and contain a mixture of memory and testimony or, we might say, interpretation. The memory, passed on through oral traditions for at least forty years, was that Jesus aligned himself with the radical agenda of John, in being baptised by John.

The interpretation was that in the person of Jesus, his life, teaching and death, the early followers had encountered, in a new and decisive way, the loving and gracious reality we name as God. Jesus was the new creation, the new being. The early Christ communities used the symbols, language and world view that was available to them.

We know that for the heavens to be literally torn apart would result in an ecological catastrophe. We affirm that God speaks - and is still speaking - but not through a PA system based in a physical location called heaven.

The oral traditions, eventually written by Mark, Matthew and Luke, are that at the beginning of Jesus' ministry he was baptised by John, and that was a dramatic and decisive moment in his life. That moment would lead Jesus to announce the new community of God, good news to the poor, hospitality to those marginalised in society, and a call to love our enemies. That moment would lead Jesus to Jerusalem and the Cross.

We are in the first days of a new year, a time to reflect on personal directions and priorities. Perhaps to reflect on your own baptism, which is a symbol of being welcomed into the community with unconditional love and grace. The Gospel may be summarised in just three words: "You are accepted."

As a church community, at Pitt Street Uniting, we are eagerly awaiting the commencement of our new Minister-in-Placement, the Reverend Josephine Inkpin, and that will happen in March.

In the wider community, COVID 19 looms large at the commencement of the new year. A number of editorials and opinion pieces have suggested we should just put 2020 behind us. "Good riddance", someone wrote.

I disagree. We need to learn, reflect and build on the lessons of 2020, such as the need for strong and well-resourced public health systems. As various Covid vaccines are rolled out in 2021, equitable access to quality health care will be more important than ever before.

The ritual of baptism reminds us of Jesus the Christ, and speaks to us of cleansing, renewal, generosity and hope. May we all know the hope of new life, healing and justice in 2021.

Amen.

References

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