

## The Baptism of the Lord: 7 January 2018

*Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11*

The Church is in a state of confusion today. 'Situation normal', you might say, but I mean specifically over what feast we should be keeping on this second Sunday after Christmas: Epiphany, or the Baptism of the Lord? The feast of the Epiphany, the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas, fell yesterday, 6 January, and some of us had the pleasure of melting through it ecumenically at South Yarra Community Baptist Church last night!

So today we observe the Baptism of the Lord; and even liturgical 'tragics' might agree that it's really 'all of a piece', for the word 'epiphany' means 'revelation', or 'showing', and Jesus' baptism is one of three manifestations or showings of his divinely human nature that we associate with the season of Epiphany: the the adoration of the Magi, and Jesus' first miracle at Cana in Galilee being the others, all of which is neatly summed up in our Offertory Hymn a little later.

And a most important feast this is, for it is in baptism – Jesus' and ours – that we participate in the priesthood of all believers, and in the priestly calling of the Church catholic, or universal, which one Orthodox theologian describes as an epiphany – a showing – of the Kingdom, notwithstanding the Church's institutional failings.<sup>1</sup> 'All are called through baptism to be priestly. The priesthood of the ordained exists to serve and promote the priesthood of the baptized.'<sup>2</sup>

Baptism is the foundation of all Christian ministry; baptismal ministry – that service in the Church and in the world to which all Christians are called – is our primary vocation, both in the sense of its coming first and of its continuing priority.

It is sometimes suggested, or assumed, that we should be baptized because Jesus was baptized, following his example as a mark of discipleship. And yet it's worth pondering the obverse: that Jesus was baptized because we are, as the hymn we've just sung suggests, 'Christ, when for us you were baptized', a line echoed in our final hymn today.<sup>3</sup>

In submitting to baptism – a baptism of repentance, as Mark describes it at the start of his gospel – Jesus in his humanity stands beside us in accepting the vocation to orient oneself, to turn whole-heartedly, toward the kingdom of God.

The authority for Jesus' public ministry, which begins three verses after his baptism in Mark, stems from his identity as 'the Beloved': an identity *manifest* when the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends upon him, as captured in the stained glass window adjacent to the nativity window by the font.

At the end of his gospel, Mark uses the very same verb to describe the curtain in the Temple being torn apart when Jesus dies. Birth, as it were (and for Mark, Jesus' baptism with the declaration 'You are my Son', is as close as we come to a birth narrative), and death – two moments book-ending this gospel in which Jesus completely identifies his own will with that of the One he called Father.

Between these bookends we have an account of his vocation to work out what he understands that will to be, as revealed in his experience of the present moment, and by the

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<sup>1</sup> Boris Bobrinskoy, 'Baptism: Sacrament of the Kingdom', in *Baptism Today: Understanding, Practice, Ecumenical Implications*, edited by Thomas F. Best; Faith & Order Paper No. 207 (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2008), 3-14, and here at 3.

<sup>2</sup> Owen F. Cummings, *Living the Days of Advent and the Christmas Season 2010* (New York: Paulist Press, 2010), Reflection on December 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ancient and Modern New Standard*, 442.

wisdom of his tradition, which is the collective experience of his community reflected variously in the Scriptures and forged over a long series of present moments, stretching all the way back to Jesse and beyond.

One of the things Mark's narrative invites us to reflect upon, as we will see in this Year B in our lectionary cycle, is that the divine will is not some fixed or final blueprint that is simply poured into compliant but passive vessels, or downloaded from the Scriptures and run like an algorithm. In his baptism, Jesus commits himself to discerning, alongside his fellow travellers, in each and every circumstance, what constitutes right action – ortho-praxy – and right praise – ortho-doxy.

Which means, as we constantly say to children and adults, being baptized doesn't mean having all the answers. The candidates in Corinth didn't even know there was a Holy Spirit. Scoring an 'F' in Trinitarian theology doesn't stand in the way of their baptism; but three other, much harder questions do: Do you turn to Christ? Do you repent of your sins? Do you reject evil?

And so it is for those of us who have come, or been brought, to these waters. The moment we as adults, or the parents and godparents of children respond to those ancient questions our public ministry as baptized Christians begins, and we are committed – lay and ordained – to a life of learning to love what God loves (including ourselves); of learning to desire and co-create that which God desires and creates.

Just as God speaks the world into being in that first creation story in Genesis – calling light out of darkness, and order out of chaos – so in baptism God orders the deepest yearnings within us – the *tohu va bohu*, as the Hebrew has it so poetically, and we struggle to translate: not chaos in the sense of a teenager's bedroom, so much as formlessness, a yawning chasm.<sup>4</sup>

In the same way that this inchoate, recalcitrant, 'raw material' of creation is cosmically ordered by the Spirit moving over the primordial waters of Hebrew mythology, so the image of God in us is existentially ordered by the same Spirit moving over the waters of baptism.

That identity as children of God, bearers of God's image, is grace which extends to us and to all people, of course, quite independently of baptism. Yet, as those who understand this in terms of participating in the eternal belovedness of Christ, we lay hold of that identity – or, rather, it lays hold of us – in baptism as nowhere else: not as an end in itself, but rather as a life-long calling to have our lives foundationally ordered, and daily re-ordered to the pattern of his living, dying, and rising; always open to new epiphanies, to ongoing revelation under Holy Spirit, who moves upon the waters of the font and the chalice still.

If you have not yet settled on a New Year's resolution, or even if you have, I invite you to make a new resolve of your baptismal promises as we recall and affirm them shortly. If you or members of your household are not yet baptized, I invite you to explore a calling to those holy orders, in which all holy orders are grounded.

And may we come to know afresh in this new year of grace the gaze in which we are held – you, me, all who worship here, and all whom we would serve in world – as the heavens are peeled back, and we are spoken into being by that singular word of God made flesh in us: 'beloved'.

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<sup>4</sup> See Stephen Frye's description of the idea of 'chaos' in Greek mythology in *Mythos: The Greek Myths Retold* (Milton Keynes: Penguin/Random House, 2017), 3.