

Sermon Feast of the Baptism of the Lord Year B 2021

Holy church sets before us today the final feast of the Christmas season. Today, with the Baptism of the Lord, we commemorate the final of what we call the manifestations of Christ. The first, his birth in Bethlehem, the second, his revelation to the Magi, and finally today Christ's Baptism by John in the Jordan. Alongside these since ancient times the church also woven amongst these the memory of the first miracle of changing water into wine at Cana. These mysteries from the life of Christ reveal to us - show us - something of how the saving work of God in Christ would unfold. *At the start* of his earthly life and *the start* of his earthly ministry the gospels record these signals to indicate where his life and ministry would lead.

Beginnings are important, even for us. Even in our lives, it is important to mark, to celebrate, to notice significant beginnings. In Australia we largely distance ourselves, and are cautious of, big, overt gestures. Important beginnings are often looked over; important milestones are missed because we 'don't want to make a fuss'; because we say, *just another day at the office*; because of our casual and indeed 'de-ritualised' culture. When we think of the most crucial of all beginnings - our births - in our culture there are *next to no* overt celebrations. A few flowers and stuffed toys that arrive in hospital can be all that marks the beginning of a child's life. We live in a ritually impoverished culture.

Still, presidents and prime ministers understand the power of marking their beginnings. Often much is made of their inaugurations or swearing in ceremonies. Many eyes and ears will be turned to Washington in a few days' time - and most likely more than usual - to try and discern the direction the US will now attempt to take. Civic leaders know that what they say and what they do at these occasions can *set the tone, the agenda* of their term in office. Their beginnings, if you like, will show how they hope their work and office to unfold. Their public gestures and public words as they take up their office will express how they see their role.

And for all the Gospel writers, too, beginnings are important. The Gospel portion we encounter today forms part of the opening verses - the *very* beginning - of the gospel of Mark, which we will now explore for the rest of the year. And it is an opening - a beginning - which sets the tone and the agenda, of the whole book. *'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'* Those opening words are incredibly evocative. Mark lays it all out there in the very first words. He points us to Jesus: this story, this book, is all about him. It is about 'good news' - *Gospel* - with all its rich and powerful evocations of freedom, liberation, reconciliation. And of course, it also points us to the beginning of Jesus' own public ministry, heralded by the Baptist.

But on another level, this 'beginning' suggests something more profound. It has echoes of the story of Genesis, *'In the beginning God created...'*. In opening his Gospel in this way, Mark is asserting that the story of Jesus has cosmic, earth shattering dimensions! In this Gospel - in the Good News - is a new beginning, a new creation, a re-writing of the entire story of the universe!... In describing the *beginning of the good news* and Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, Mark is setting the tone for both the book that follows and how we are to see and understand Jesus.

But to begin something implies the ending of something. Beginning something new suggests that there must also be an ending of something old. We don't know much about Jesus' life before he emerges on the banks of the Jordan River. But we do know that as he comes to John for baptism, whatever his earlier hidden life was, he leaves it behind. Something new commences - begins - for him. To emphasize the point Mark speaks of the descent of the Holy Spirit in the form of dove. It suggests to us an anointing, *a setting aside*, a consecration if you like. As Christ emerges out of the water there is this clear sense that he has been set aside for something new that is *now* beginning. And it begins with the blessing - the favour - of the Father.

This idea of newness and endings we see at work in Jesus' own baptism we see at work in ours as well. While on the one hand we speak of being washed and of newness of life in baptism, we also are reminded that our Baptism is also a sharing in Christ's death. Very carefully and very intentionally, then, do our

baptismal rites seek to capture these ideas of both newness and endings. And so, we are asked at our baptism: *do you turn to Christ? Do you repent of your sins? Do you reject selfish living? Do you renounce Satan and all evil?* If we want to walk the way of Jesus Christ, if we seek to be his disciple, then we *begin* by *ending* our past attachments, by leaving behind our sinful selves, by moving away from those things which keep us from God. The beginnings that baptism incorporates us into is no less than a new creation. *In the beginning God created.* And, at the waters of the font, a *new creation* is begun.

As Christ is *set aside* for his work and ministry at the Jordan, so too are we are set aside when our old lives are washed away. *Baptism sets us apart.* The call of the Christian is the call to new beginnings. It is not the call to remain indistinguishable from the everyone else; it is not the call to obscurity. When we are baptised, we are not dressed in army greens and told to run away and hide! Our baptismal garment is not camouflage!! No! Our baptismal garment is white, so we stand out; so we *can* be noticed. We do not retreat into the shadows but told to carry Christ's transforming light into the world.

If we take our baptismal vocation seriously then *we won't* take seriously the idea that we simply have to adopt the dominant values of the world around us. But that *is* one of the pressures that rubs up against the church. It is not a new challenge. It has always been with us. But it is the particular temptation of this period of change and uncertainty: to abandon our distinctiveness; to downplay our 'setting apart'; to imagine that if we mirror back to the dominant culture its own values then we will get the 'street cred' we so desperately want.

But baptism comes at cost. And it's the cost of being set apart. New life in Christ means setting aside our old life, our past life, our sinful, disordered life to make room for God's life. It means for us, just as it meant for Christ descending into the waters of the Jordan, humility and obedience. It means giving up *our* ideas of what right and good and attuning ourselves *to what God has revealed* as right and good. Then, and only then, will the beginnings of the good news in us be a true and authentic gospel. Amen.