

St Peter's, Ealing,
Sunday 10th January 2021
The Baptism of the Lord

I am sure I have shared with you on many occasions my love of the Gospel of Mark. The writing is so straight forward and matter of fact. It is a bit like Ronseal varnish – it does exactly what it says on the tin. Mark 1:1; “This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” No mucking about, straight to the point. Then the rest of the gospel is telling you about the Son of God and why he is the Son of God.

To begin this in verse 2 the writer invokes the wisdom of the prophets, slightly misquoting Isaiah in underlining who it is God will send to prepare the way of the Lord. Then in verse 4 the writer gets straight into the Jesus story by answering the question of why was Jesus needed. John is baptising in the Jordan and the people, aware of their own and their corporate need for atonement at this time of occupation and uncertainty are flooding to John's call to repentance.

Mark has beautifully set the scene for Jesus' arrival. No pomp and ceremony, no fan fare and great crowds of jubilation; that comes later on Palm Sunday. In Matthew's gospel there is a discussion between Jesus and John about Jesus' need to be baptised. Here in Mark Jesus' request for baptism is not an issue. Having identified the need of the people for salvation Mark's aim is to identify their Saviour. John has already said in verse 7 it is not him, that even the righteous John is unworthy to untie the sandals of the one who is to come after him. That John's baptism is merely with water, just a symbolic statement of everyone's intension of repentance; the baptism of the Saviour is to be life changing, through the power of God in the Holy Spirit.

As Jesus is baptised so these two baptisms come together. He enters the water and the world changes forever. For as Jesus rises from the water he is affirmed by God as God's Son, the beloved. The heavens are opened, not just opened they are torn apart, never to be the same again, and the Holy Spirit, given in the shape of a dove, descends and the divine voice declares to everyone who will hear that this man from Nazareth truly is the Son of God.

All pretty dramatic really and a dramatist would say this was a well thought out opening sequence. Yet for Mark and his readers this is most important; setting out who Jesus is and what he has come for.

At this point in the churches year we hear the story of Jesus as the story of our salvation. And we begin the telling of this story with Jesus' baptism for two reasons; this is where Jesus' earthly ministry begins and it is in our baptism, this new baptism born of water and the spirit, that we begin our Christian story.

The Book of Common Prayer describes the sacraments as the outward and visible sign of God's inward and invisible grace. In baptism the water and anointing oil is the outward sign that we offer ourselves to God, asking for God's grace in our lives. Today, if we had been gathering in church, we would have taken the opportunity to renew those vows of baptism that draw us ever closer to God. Promises that encourage us to follow Christ daily and to fulfil our place as Jesus' disciples in our community. Baptism then is saying to the world 'I am a follower of Jesus. I am a disciple of Jesus.' It is in this declaration, through this receiving of God's love that we can know we are saved, we are renewed, we are forgiven. Before this we are like those crowds coming out of Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside – lost and confused, looking for hope and meaning. Through our baptism, through our receiving God into our lives we now have the way to love and understanding, hope and meaning as Jesus is revealed to us. As we receive our baptism, unlike the baptism of John, we too receive openly and with joy the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Mark's gospel does not stop there, neither does ours. If these dark days have shown us anything it is the need to hold on to that promise of God given us in our baptism, to respond to the needs around us, to carry out our discipleship daily, living the good news of Jesus to care and to love, to pray and to grow in faith.

If we had been in church today we would have renewed our baptismal vows. We would have rededicated ourselves to God and heard again God's call upon our lives to live the good news. In this coming week I encourage you to read again Mark's telling of the story of Jesus. It is a Gospel designed to be read from beginning to end, without interruption. I encourage you to read again the baptism service and in your prayers to renew your discipleship, and I encourage you to pray for guidance upon your life, that you may live the will of God daily as God's followers.