

Ordained in Baptism

A sermon on Mark 1:4-11; Genesis 1:1-5; & Psalm 29 by Nathan Nettleton, 7 January 2024

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Message

In baptism, the Holy Spirit is ordaining us (all of us) for mission.

Sermon

Each year on this first Sunday after the close of the Christmas season, we hear the story of the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John. It invites us to reflect not only on what baptism meant for Jesus, but on what it means for us.

This time we heard the story from Mark's gospel, and in his version, the baptism is the opening scene of the gospel journey. John the Baptist called people to a radical obedience to God, and he baptised those who responded, as a final sign of the conversion of all Israel and of the beginning of the reign of God, or the culture of God. Jesus recognises and affirms John's message by coming to him for baptism along with all the rest.

You might not be comfortable with using the words conversion or repentance for what happened to Jesus, and the Church has often struggled with that idea, but whatever you want to call it, there is a big change in his life from this time on. For the last eighteen years Jesus had done nothing to hit the headlines. To the best of our knowledge, he'd done his apprenticeship and worked quietly in the family carpentry business for pretty much all of that time. There are no reports of crowds flocking to the chippy's shop to sit on the saw dust and hang on every word that proceeded from the mouth of the chippy.

Apparently his mother thought he was the messiah and he thought his mother was a virgin but, according to some of my Jewish friends, neither of those things are particularly unusual in Jewish families. He wasn't making any waves. He wasn't upsetting anybody or getting in any trouble. So far as we know he was just letting the world go on as it always had.

But now he comes out to John to be baptised, and from here on he radically changes his style. He turns around. He changes track. He converts to a new approach. And what a change it is.

Immediately following his baptism, the satan personally makes a last ditch effort to throw him off course. Within another 7 verses we've got people quitting their jobs to follow him. Within 13 verses we've got demons screaming at him in the synagogue. Within 17 verses we've got the news spreading all over Galilee. Within 34 verses he can no longer enter a town openly because of the disturbance that would be caused. Within 41 verses he is being accused of blasphemy by the lawyers. And within 62 verses we've already got religious and political powerbrokers plotting to kill him.

All quite a dramatic impact for a gentle chippy from Nazareth! You can't tell me nothing changed. People don't plot to kill you because you are good. They plot to kill you because you behave in ways that clash with and expose the evil that they profit from.

Donald McKay didn't get killed because he didn't sell drugs. He got killed because he exposed those who did. Archbishop Romero didn't get killed because he didn't torture and oppress. He got killed because he denounced those who did. Martin Luther King didn't get

killed because he cared about those oppressed by racism and poverty. He got killed because he called on them to stop cooperating with the evil structures that held them there. Yitzhak Rabin didn't get killed for giving up his hawkish military past and shaking hands with Yassar Arafat. He got killed for calling the whole nation of Israel to follow him in that, to follow him on a pathway towards peace with the Palestinians.

Jesus didn't get killed because he was righteous and loving and merciful and just. He was killed because he set about dismantling the corrupt, hateful and oppressive value system that is not only held by most people but which underpinned the religious institutions of his day. And because he too called the rest of us to follow him in that.

And so Jesus goes through the waters of baptism for conversion and comes out with a new mind set, a new approach, a new lifestyle, a radical new mission to bring about the culture of God here on earth. That's what I call a conversion. And that's what I call ordination. And that's what baptism is all about. Conversion *from* one way of life and ordination *to* a new way.

Something changed pretty dramatically when Jesus was baptised and Mark records it so that we can not only understand but do likewise. Mark is calling for us to undergo the same sort of dramatic transformation so that we too can be transformed and become agents of transformation in the world around us. He is calling for us to be converted from something and ordained to something.

So what actually happened to Jesus at his baptism? Others may have experienced the forgiveness of sins for conversion at this moment, but what Jesus experienced was the Spirit of God. He saw the heavens torn open and the Spirit of God descending like a dove on him. And a voice from heaven said, "You are my Child, the Beloved, in you I am delighted."

This is the same Spirit of God who we met in the first sentence of Genesis, brooding over the formless earth, like a mother bird over her egg, cherishing it and willing it to life. This is the Spirit who broods over each one of us, cherishing us and willing us towards fullness of life. This is the Spirit who is the active creative power of God in the world, who calls and guides and loves us into the paths of God, who calls us to live life and to create life and to redeem life and to enhance life and to protect life. It was this Spirit who came down and alighted on Jesus as he emerged from the water and claimed him as the son of God who brings delight to the Lord.

"You are my Child, the beloved. In you I delight." This is the same voice that our Psalm said can split the mountain ash and make Mount Bogong jump like a calf. This voice that speaks to Jesus in baptism later speaks to us on the Mountain of Transfiguration telling us to listen to the Son. And this is the same voice that speaks over each and every one of us in our baptisms, saying, "You are my child, my beloved, in whom I delight." Whether you hear it or not – maybe some of you did but I didn't – this is the voice of God to you at the moment of your baptism and at every moment since. "You are my child, my beloved, in whom I delight."

But it is not spoken just so that you can say, "Oh, isn't that nice, I'm a child of God." It is spoken so that you might follow in the footsteps of the Son. The fruits of Jesus's experience of the Spirit and his response to that voice can be seen in every following story of the gospel. He was a changed man from this moment on, a man on a mission, a man bent on bringing that message of an intimate, merciful, healing, liberating God to people in need, even if it cost

him his life. The same Spirit that descended and alighted on Jesus at his baptism is given to us . . . and for the same reason. Baptism is the ordination of every follower of Jesus to the mission of Jesus.

It would be a mistake to hear that as simply referring to each of us, one at a time. It does refer to each of us, but more especially to all of us together. The voice that speaks over us in our baptisms says, “You, plural. You all are my child, my beloved, in whom I delight.”

And we all, together, are given the Spirit for the same purpose as was Jesus. Jesus was given the Spirit for the sick whom he healed. We are given the Spirit so that, being healed, we may lead others to healing.

Jesus was given the Spirit for the sinners whose sins he forgave. We are given the Spirit so that as we realise how utterly dependent we are on his mercy, we may offer forgiveness and mercy to others.

Jesus was given the Spirit for the poor and the outcast whose fellowship he sought out. We are given the Spirit so that, being accepted and welcomed, we may welcome and embrace those who are cast out by our society.

Jesus was given the Spirit for the men and women who he called to follow him in discipleship. We are given the Spirit as those men and women whom he has called so that we might follow in his footsteps and carry on his mission.

As we rise up from the waters and embrace that call, a voice is heard from heaven, ringing over the waters: “You, all of you, are my beloved child, in whom I delight. Go, do as my beloved son has done.”