

Baptism of Jesus

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Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

The second scene of the first act of Mark's gospel opens as Jesus appears *from Galilee: in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee*. The scene will close when Jesus reappears coming back *into Galilee*, just 5 verses later. [These opening scenes are very short in this gospel!] But a lot has happened! In between, there is considerable movement across time and space: a baptism and a vision at the Jordan, a scene change to the wilderness testing, and an undefined passage of time until the story is taken up again in Galilee.

The entry of Jesus into Mark's gospel has been described as happening in the 'most anti-climactic fashion conceivable'. The dramatic opening words of the gospel — *the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God* — arouses / heightens our expectations. But then, after turning immediately to the prophetic ministry of John and so delaying our expectations, the abrupt introduction of the story's main character further throws us off guard. Jesus appears simply as one of the anonymous crowd coming to the Baptist. The fact that he comes from "Nazareth in Galilee" further intensifies the sense of dislocation. One would expect the hero to be credentialed through miraculous origins or a solid genealogy (something Matthew and Luke will not be able to resist!). Mark, however, stresses Jesus' obscure origins — from Nazareth. It was a place of no repute.

But it was situated in a region — Galilee — that was notorious! The northern border of Palestine, it was regarded with contempt and suspicion by most southerners. Galilee was surrounded by Hellenistic cities, populated heavily by gentiles, predominantly poor, and geographically cut off from Judea (in the south) by Samaria (the land of the totally outcast). In other words, Mark has confirmed, right at the outset, that Jesus' origins are not at the centre of religious and political power, but at the periphery / the margins. And, of course, he will make it clear, as the story unfolds, that Jesus will live and die in the tension between the centre and the periphery.

Yet, it is precisely upon this figure, of these doubtful social origins, in this remote location, that the divine favours falls.

Last week I began by saying that it had been a terrible week — given what had been happening in Gaza. How much worse has it now become! Though even the US has decided no longer to block a UN Security council resolution calling for an immediate and enduring ceasefire, Gaza continues to be bombed day and night and the number of Palestinians killed has now passed 800. Religious leaders around the world have joined together calling for an end to the violence: Pope Benedict, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Patriarchs and Heads of Churches in Jerusalem, the Islamic leader, Ayatollah Khamenei — all condemn the use of violence and urge both sides to talk and find political solutions to the conflict. You have been given a copy of the statement by Bishop Dawani of Jerusalem about the Ahli Arab Hospital. It helps us understand how things are in one spot in Gaza from someone who knows the situation and is close by. He writes among other things that the hospital has no windows. It is apparent from media reports also that Gaza's largest hospital has no electricity. And yet people continue to be wounded and to seek help, and the staff continues to care. We can play a small part in responding to the humanitarian need by supporting one or other of the many appeals that have been launched. You might like to use the retiring offering this morning to contribute to the [NCCA](#) appeal in support of the relief work of the local churches through the [MECC](#). We do what we can.

But the basic problem is that the brutal conflict continues. UN resolutions do not stop it. From the perspective of the powerful in the world, Gaza is not at the centre. It is a poverty-stricken corner of the world — with virtually no resources. It is on the periphery!

Yet, consistent with a central message of the Hebrew religious tradition, Mark tells at the outset of his gospel, that it is precisely upon this person, from a remote and despised place, from the periphery, that the divine favour falls!

This figure has been announced by Mark simply as one of an anonymous crowd coming for baptism. But when this unknown one rises from the waters of the Jordan, it is to a vision which, in the language of imagery — the only language that can be used — is a vision of the heavens being rent asunder and a voice speaking to him as the chosen / favoured One. However, as yet, this remains 'privileged information', for Mark gives no indication that any of the bystanders at the Jordan saw or heard anything. But as a dramatic device, it gives the reader a glimpse behind the scenes, a sort of dramatic aside, which at the very beginning, lets the reader in on the secret of this man's true identity.

The unspoken question — *could this unknown Nazarene villager be the fulfilment of the divine promise — of all the ancient longings of the prophets?* — is immediately answered. Indeed, he is!

Jesus is identified as "beloved Son", the language calling to mind two key scriptural traditions. The first is the royal messianic psalm (Ps. 2), in which the king is identified as God's son and is enthroned over against the "rulers of the earth". Yet, the triumphal tone of this royal tradition is qualified by the simultaneous allusion to the Suffering Servant of II Isaiah: *Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights. I will put my spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations; he will not cry or lift up his voice in the street, a bruised reed he will not break.*

Several times in the poems of Isaiah of the Exile there appears a mysterious figure designated as "the servant of the Lord". In at least four passages, the Servant is described, though not clearly identified. Yet, the strongest impression is that this Isaiah understood this mysterious servant figure to be the nation. He is speaking out of the Hebrew people's covenant tradition, which was a conviction about the relationship between God, who had manifested his deed of benevolence, and the servant nation, whose responsibility was to serve God in gratitude and reverence. The concept of service was at the heart of the nation's faith from the very first...***and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth.*** Here something is added to the portrait of the Servant. Not only does God uphold his Servant, but he is God's agent, endowed with God's spirit, who in a quiet way will bring justice to the nations. How tragically ironic that such a self-understanding is a central part of the Jewish religious tradition!

From the Christian standpoint, of course, the deepest meaning and fulfilment of this prophetic ideal and hope is found in Jesus. So our gospel writer has reflected the image of the Servant right from the beginning — at the baptism — so that there is no doubt about the true identity of this anonymous figure from a remote place — the periphery.

Other clues that Mark has given us surrounding Jesus' baptism suggest that something of profound importance is going on here and indeed signal the creation of a new humanity. Jesus comes for baptism as one of an anonymous crowd, yet he has to be seen as quite distinct from all those others whom John baptised **in** the Jordan River. In contrast to the others — and this is a point of real difference — Jesus was baptised **into** the Jordan [two different prepositions in

Greek]. The implication is that Jesus was submitting himself to the full depth of 'conversion' that John's baptism represented — abandoning himself to a new and radical way.

It is a total abandonment to God as the focus of commitment, of loyalty! The moral order into which he was born, the structures and the values of the society in which he lived, the whole life of that society as it was maintained by the institutions through which power was ordered and exercised, are not the things of ultimate loyalty. 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 Kingdom of God here on earth. That's conversion. And as confirmation of the beginning of a new age, he sees heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him — hovering just as it had on the first day of creation as Genesis tells us. Here again the Spirit is present signalling the beginning of a new stage in the work of God reconciling all things to God's self. Out of the experience come the conviction for Jesus: *you are my Son whom I love; and with you I am well pleased.*

From now on Jesus' mission will be to question, to challenge — everything! His mission will be to judge every aspect of life in the light of his point of ultimate loyalty — the mind and being of God. *He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his teaching.*

In being reminded of these things today, we are also reminded that each one of us is called to follow Jesus and to be converted and to live out our faith, seeking peace and love and mercy and freedom for all people. This is what the waters of baptism symbolise. It's not an easy calling, and can cost dearly. But nothing beyond ourselves will ever be changed by playing it safe. And ultimately that is where our conversion will be evaluated. The Spirit comes upon us with healing for two reasons. Firstly because God loves us and longs to see us cleansed, healed and whole. And secondly, because God then wants to equip us for the task of confronting the evil outside us in our world and of transforming our world into God's Kingdom of love and peace and freedom and justice and righteousness.

And so we struggle for peace and justice and goodness because in the end that is what really matters. We do what we can, according to where we are at in our journey — as we learn and love and grow. But God's mission must be where we're headed, if what is symbolised by baptism means anything. And if that's the road we're on then God is saying to us too, "You are my beloved child and with you I am pleased".