

## **Jesus's Baptism: God With Us in the Struggle**

Sermon for the Baptism of Jesus, Year B—7 January 2024

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

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

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

Friends, the Roman Empire was not famous for its social workers. Aztec priests didn't have to do safe ministry training. And the Vikings weren't champions of workplace health and safety. Bringing this assessment of paganism up to date there was no National Socialist Disability Insurance Scheme in Hitler's Germany; while today the anxious and violent pagan mentality is still evident in the religion of Vladimir Putin, of Donald Trump, and even of Benjamin Netanyahu, who seems to favour those Old Testament texts about ethnic cleansing—those texts that turn a lot of sensitive-minded people away from religion altogether.

But we Christians have a different story to tell, rooted in the New Testament but also in the Old Testament when we learn to read it right. Instead of divine judgement and disapproval fuelling earthly hatreds and divisions, what if God is a God of peace, a God in solidarity with struggling humanity, a God for us not against us?

It's very telling that although there's a lot of divine and human violence in the Old Testament, Genesis 1 begins with a scene of complete peace. Judah in its Babylonian exile had encountered the religion of Babylon's high god who'd split the body of watery chaos to create the world—all recorded in an epic called the Enuma Elish, which was typical of pagan creation stories. But in Genesis 1 a Jewish theologian is messing with the Enuma Elish and its chaotic waters to tell a different story. There's no violence, no struggle with chaotic waters but simply the Spirit's breath moving on the deep, with creation's standard divisions emerging without any cosmic axe murder to get things started. Hence, we see night and day peacefully differentiated as the first step in an unfailingly peaceful series over a leisurely six days—more like a test match than a cosmic conflagration. So, it's significant that the Bible begins with a peaceful creation story. And in time all the typical human violence that the Old Testament unflinchingly acknowledges is deconstructed and undone as God's people learn who God is and who God isn't and can begin to leave religious hatred and violence behind. Our psalm today is another example of how violent pagan texts are exposed and undone in the Old Testament. This was an ancient poem originally composed in praise of a storm deity who ripped things up in a violent maelstrom. But in Israel's hands this violent text is turned into praise for Israel's God, who stands above the realm of chaos and violence and whose last word in this psalm is a blessing of peace.

All this sets the scene for Jesus's baptism in our gospel today—not a Christian baptism, like ours, but Jesus lining up with the whole crowd of flawed and yearning people who come to John the Baptist and his promised new beginning. The greater one whose coming John the Baptist has predicted, the one who a well-pleased God declares to be his beloved son, the one who represents a new creation as God's Spirit again moves on the waters, this one is totally unlike any kind of angry pagan deity. There's no disapproving God to be found here, no condemnation, no superior distancing on God's part, but instead Jesus lines up with everyone else by the Jordan. Clearly, Jesus doesn't care who they are, what they've done or not done, how worthy or unworthy they might be, and how far from God they may have strayed. They're his people, and his place is with

them from beginning to end, in solidarity with struggling humanity from his baptism to his crucifixion. And, in fact, the very greatness of Jesus declared by God is most evident in this humble solidarity—at one with God, yes, but also at one with the human condition, not ashamed to stand shoulder to shoulder with the burdened and the compromised.

And for us, too, this same solidarity is assured. Jesus is with *us*—without airs and graces, without maintaining a sanitary cordon, without concern for purity, or for keeping strict accounts of who's in and who's out. So, we can be sure of Jesus's presence with us in the depths and beyond the pale, even when God seems absent—in the police lockup, for instance, when some dreadful lapse or some awful mistake has caught up with us; or in the family court, when all those years of belonging and hope are going out the window; perhaps in the boss's office, where our confident life narrative starts to unravel thanks to a redundancy slip, or maybe looking askance at the smouldering ruins of our home after a fire, or alone with our fears in the oncology ward; and then, worse still, at the deathbed, and then the graveside, when the void presses vicelike on our heart and the light of life is extinguished.

But there, friends, in the grip of death and bile and failure, when a pagan might well be looking for someone to blame or to sacrifice, and even perhaps themselves, we can remember Jesus's promise to be with us always, to the end of the age, breathing his word of peace in our ear—that it's alright, that we're alright, that there is a way back starting with forgiveness if that's what's needed, but always in unbroken solidarity.

And friends this is our calling as the Church, to know this reality and show it to the world. Our Acts reading today has a group of spiritual seekers baptised and confirmed by Paul through the laying on of his apostolic hands—they'd come to John the Baptist's movement for a washing but now through Paul they'd found the Christian fulness of what they sought. The Spirit of God that moved on the waters in Genesis, that settled on Jesus in the waters of his baptism, now settles on these new Christians, and we hear that they spoke in new tongues and prophesied. These are apocalyptic signs of a new day dawning, and whatever this may or may not have meant for them psychologically, it meant that they'd never be the same.

When I think of new tongues, I think of a language that doesn't reflect division and mutual incomprehension, like normal languages do in our polyglot world, but a new experience of human togetherness beyond the fundamental divisions that humanity loves to establish with paganism to manage these divisions for us. Likewise, the prophetic speech of these new Christians reflects a new pitch of understanding: they know what's going on and they won't play the old games anymore.

Friends, this is the Church, gathered for the Eucharist in which Jesus is really present and his Spirit is really active among us, opening a new deathless life for us. Here, Jesus is calling the world to something that Romans and Aztecs and Vikings and Nazis and all the rest, including a lot of supposed Bible believers today, could not imagine. But God doesn't hate them for it. Instead, God lines up alongside them, and us, here in the travail of history, and offers us a better way beyond all that fear and judgementalism and violence. That way is none other than Jesus Christ, in whom we're baptised, and confirmed, who's with us here today in word and sacrament.

The Lord be with you ...