

Sermon - heaven come down to earth

Based on Genesis 1.1-5, Acts 19.1-7, and Mark 1.4-11 (NRSV)

Mark - at the start

- Today, as we observe the baptism of Jesus, we are given a description of that event from Mark's account.
- Mark's whole Gospel is short, immediate, and direct.
- He doesn't take his time with what he wants to say: compared to the other Gospel accounts he almost appears to be in a hurry.
- If you were to read the fifteen and a half chapters of Mark aloud, it would take just over two hours.
- Mark describes Jesus' baptism event in just three sentences, after a slightly longer description of John the Baptist.
- However, before we look at that passage, it is helpful to engage with the context that today's other Scripture readings provide.

Let there be light!

- The Old Testament reading - taken from the start of the poetic hymn of creation - provides us with some fundamental theology.
- We are given two metaphysical tensions, between chaos and order, and darkness and light.
- The poet of Genesis writes: *the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.* (Genesis 1.2)
- It is a description, not of nothing or nothingness, but rather of chaos.
- We don't have to think of chaos necessarily as being violent, as even slow movement can be chaotic.
- Nor does it have to involve a maelstrom or profusion of elements, as even a few elements can be described as chaotic relative to each other.
- Rather, it is about disorder and unpredictability and purposelessness.
- And into this chaotic purposeless disorder God speaks: his Spirit or breath goes out from him, and orders creation - or creates order, and meaning, and purpose.
- And the poet describes the first ordering that God manifests is the divine light himself.
- It is relevant to note that God orders his divine light on the metaphorical first day, and only brings into order the sun and moon on the metaphorical fourth day.
- So the light that God ordains to start with is distinct from the light of the sun and our earthly comprehension of the cycle of night and day.
- The poet of Genesis is describing here in the opening verses a light that might be better described as divine, or of heaven - a light by which, and within which, everything else is ordained into being.

Skhizein!

- And if we jump ahead briefly to the Gospel passage, as Jesus comes up out of the water, the heavens are torn apart and the Spirit descends upon him.
- 'The heavens' in this description is a reference to the sky, or even the air above and about us.
- 'The heavens' is not a reference to Heaven, where God's presence is fully manifest for us, but of the physical body of air which is around and above us.
- It is this earthly body of air that is torn apart - *schizomenous* - like the ripping of cloth, thus exposing heaven to earth, and connecting the two.
- Luke and Matthew give us the nativity stories whereby we understand how the birth of the infant Jesus connects heaven and earth using powerful images of divine messengers and signs.
- Mark bypasses these and focuses on this connection between heaven and earth through the baptism event.

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- The heavens are torn open and God's Spirit is manifest in the tangibly visible form of a dove.

The baptism of the Ephesians

- I'll continue reflecting on the Gospel passage in a moment, but at this point we can look at the short story from the book of Acts.
- When Paul first visits Ephesus, he finds some people who are followers of - well, it's not clear if they are following the teachings of John the Baptist, or of Jesus of Nazareth.
- They are definitely disciples - which means that they have been drawn to the teachings, presumably of Jesus, but do not yet have the whole picture.
- When they are described as not even having heard of the Holy Spirit, we understand that it does not mean that they have not heard about God's Spirit.
- Rather, that they had not yet heard about the Pentecost event, whereby God's Spirit was now being made manifest through people being able to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.
- And the Pentecost event goes hand-in-hand with the baptism of Jesus.
- Since it is at *that* moment that Jesus becomes the Christ - the Anointed One - the one anointed by God's Spirit.
- The baptism of Jesus is the event that makes him Christ.
- I know we sometimes refer to the baby Jesus as the Christ child, in acknowledgement of his divine nature, however if we wanted to be pedantic and technically accurate, the man Jesus should only be referred to as the Christ from the point of his baptism.
- And the key aspect that the story from Acts highlights, is that by being the first mortal to be anointed by the Spirit in this way, Jesus is the pioneer and model for others to be likewise anointed with God's Spirit.
- Paul acknowledges this when he explains to these early disciples in Ephesus about the difference between the baptism of John - a baptism of repentance - and the baptism of Jesus.
- Just as John the Baptist himself points out:
 - *'I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'* (Mark 1.8)
- And, of course, Jesus undergoes this baptism himself first, to lead the way, to model this moment of intentionally being open to participating in this moment of connection between heaven and earth.
- And so, having opened their hearts and minds to this insight, Paul then baptises these early disciples *'in the name of the Lord Jesus. [And] when Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them'* (Acts 19.5-6)

Baptism transformed

- For Paul, and Luke - the writer of Acts, being baptised with water in the name of the Lord Jesus was fundamentally linked to receiving the Holy Spirit - in the same way that Jesus' own anointing with the Spirit was part of his own baptism in water.
- It is interesting to note here that Jesus appeared to be participating in John's baptism of repentance - and yet, as invariably happens when Jesus is involved, that baptism is transformed into something new - something more profound.
- So as we re-engage with the Gospel passage again, we can see how Mark does not describe Jesus confessing his sins the way that John instructs others to do when he baptises them.
- Jesus comes to this baptism, we like to think, already in a state of grace, and thus not needing John's baptism at all.

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- And yet Jesus participates in this, as if he was just like everyone else, as if he too needed to undergo a ritual cleansing of sin - a washing away of the things that harm and damage one's relationship with the divine.
- And this is the obvious start of Jesus' revealing his own humility, that he becomes as one of us - not only born as an infant, but through his own volition and choice as an adult.
- He subjects himself to John's baptism, even though John recognises Jesus as being greater than him.
- And, as I said, Jesus then transforms that baptism into something more profound and meaningful.

Participating in his baptism

- And we are given the dramatic contrast of the heavens being 'torn apart', the sudden ripping appearing to be quite violent, with the contrasting motion of a dove fluttering down as the Spirit embraces and envelopes Jesus.
- I remind you of what I said regarding the poetic hymn of creation from Genesis, of how when God speaks his word, his Spirit or breath goes out from him, and orders creation - or creates order, and meaning, and purpose.
- And so, here too, when heaven and earth are joined in this moment, God speaks his word: 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'
- And into this new situation, whereby the son of Mary, Son of God, obediently humbles himself, God ordains a deeper purpose and meaning.
- Jesus the Christ himself becomes that deeper purpose and meaning, made manifest for us.
- And then both shows us the way and becomes the way, for us to participate in that deeper meaning and purpose ourselves.
- Just as those early disciples in Ephesus were drawn deeper into the way of Christ when they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus, so too are we invited to be drawn deeper into the way of Christ through our own baptism.
- Just as those twelve disciples found themselves making manifest the same baptism by the Holy Spirit, so too are we invited to make our baptism by the Holy Spirit manifest.
- Since it is through God speaking his words to each of us who seek to connect with God through Jesus: 'You are my beloved child.'
- It is for each of us to hear these words of God for ourselves, and acknowledge them, as God seeks to connect with us through his Son: 'With you I am well pleased.'
- Jesus, in humble obedience, becomes one of us, and then, in that moment of the joining of heaven and earth, invites us to participate in that moment, and thereby have whatever is disordered in our lives re-order according to his divine purpose.
- And though it is recorded as a moment in time, we are continually invited into that moment so that our lives can continually be rightly ordered.
- And then, as his anointed people in the world, manifest further that re-ordering for the whole world.
- As we participate in the divine light from the beginning of creation, so may that light enlighten the whole world, for the peace and well-being of all, and for the glory of God.
- In his name. Amen.