

## Baptism of Jesus 8<sup>th</sup> January 2012

Gen 1.1-5; Mark 1.4-11

Today as we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus it is a good time to reconnect with our own baptism and what it means for us. Most of us were baptised as babies so we have no personal memory of it - we have to rely on what we have been told. Those can include the place, particular garments, who the priest might have been. Mine was fairly unusual for now but I suspect was not so unusual for its time. The parish church was 130 miles away. I was baptised when the priest made a pastoral visit to the tea estate. It took place in the manager's house, in the dining room and the font was a glass mixing bowl from the kitchen. I knew later who my godparents were but they weren't present at the ceremony. What was yours like? Take a few moments to bring to mind the story.....PAUSE.

By all accounts in the gospels Jesus baptism was a very significant event in his life. Raymond Schwager, a German Jesuit theologian has written an imaginative description of what it might have been like for Jesus using language which is gleaned from descriptions of religious experiences (Raymond Schwager 1998 *Jesus of Nazareth*, New York: Crossroad pp33-34). . He particularly brings in ideas of heightened awareness both before and after the event, a sense of union with the universe, a sensory experience like brushed with a wing tip and feeling a delicate breath around him and entering him and a shift inside him which integrates a spiritual sense of self with the physical sense of who he is. And he hears the Voice: You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased. It is transformative. I think he is right to think in these ways. The baptism of Jesus marks a massive change of direction in Jesus' life - from being the carpenter and a very spiritual one no doubt to being a person on a mission to proclaim God's imminent presence among the people as an alternative ruler to the human authority structures.

Our baptism service is multisensory, and chock full of images and metaphors. I am amazed by how much can be crammed into about three pages worth of liturgy. Among the metaphors are a change of allegiance, moving from darkness to light, dying to an old way of being and becoming alive to a new way of being, being born through water and the spirit, a new creation, being clothed with Christ, moving out of slavery to sin through the waters of baptism into freedom - the Exodus story. There are metaphors for the Christian life as learners, as soldiers, as athletes. There are the sensory factors of the water being poured

onto our heads, the double sensory anointing with oil (touch and smell), visual and tactile senses used with the giving of a lit candle, and the hearing of words spoken to us and about us telling us we belong to Christ, telling us that we are lights to shine in the world, that we are members of one another. I think it is a pity that we don't have the words said to us that Jesus heard at his baptism: *you are my son, you are my daughter, the beloved, with you I am well pleased.* Certainly as parents of our children we say this kind of stuff every day. One of the images of God that Jesus gave is that God is our father; more that we can use a familiar name for father with God - papa, daddy. Some may want to use a feminine image or non-gender like lover or friend. So I think we can hear those words for ourselves today. You are my son/daughter, the beloved with whom I am well pleased. These words are behind the extra words where I call you *Dearly beloved in Christ* at the greeting at the beginning of each service. These are words that we can let sink deeply into the centre of our being - into our psyche.

Words are very powerful. The concept of 'word' in the scriptures is immensely powerful. Have a look at the OT passage we had today, part of the first creation story. It is a story that was probably composed when the Jews were in exile in Babylon in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. Every year in Babylon there was a huge ceremony about creation in which the ancient story, the Ennuma Elish, was told. In it, Marduk, the chief god in Babylon, creates everything following a battle between the gods of the sweet and salt waters and their children. Marduk is one of the children. He kills his mother, cuts her in half forming the earth and the dome of the sky. Human beings are created from the blood of a god who has committed murder and clay and they are created to serve the gods. It is a story of creation through violence. The Jewish priests told the Genesis story as a counter story. In it the creative action is through the spoken word of God. God says 'Let there be....' It is not a scientific text, it is highly theological, talking about God as one not many, that matter is just matter and it is good, and how we relate to God and matter. Jesus is called the Word at the beginning of John's gospel.

We also know how life changing some words can be - words that dismiss us and our achievements can be very destructive. Words of love and affirmation can bring very powerful healing, especially if you have been rejected and marginalised. We can think back on words spoken to us and they still have power to harm or to comfort. Words, combined with touch and seeing, are very

powerful. For me it is great to look up as I read from the scriptures and see you reading visually and hearing at the same time. I am sure that you get more out of the experience than if you just listened. Hearing words of love help us know we are loved. And if we know we are loved here is much we will do for the lover and for the ones the lover loves.

The great spiritual writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Henri Nouwen, used to draw a line across a chalkboard and put two small vertical lines, not far apart, somewhere towards the middle. He then would tell his hearers that the line represented their full life in God. They were loved before they were born and they are loved after they die. The space between the two lines is the time between their birth here on planet earth and their death on planet earth. During this time they were to learn how to say 'I love you' to God. He suggests an exercise of meditation over 30 minutes or so. You can do it in a longer or shorter time if you like. For the first ten minutes you repeat to Jesus: *Jesus, you are the Son of God, the Beloved*. For the next ten minutes, you repeat: *Jesus, I am the son/daughter of God, the beloved*. For the last ten minutes, you repeat, *Jesus, we are the children of God, the beloved*, while remembering other people by bringing their faces or names to mind. This is a powerful use of words. They are words of grace telling us deep truths about ourselves and others.

As you come up to communion try repeating *Jesus you are the son of God the beloved*. As you receive communion, intentionally receive the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ so that Christ now resides in you and is one with you. That can help you say as you leave the communion rail *Jesus, I am the son/daughter of God, the beloved*. As you light a candle, ask God or Jesus or the Spirit to shine in your life and in the lives of those for you pray. When you go back to your seat, sit holding in your mind and heart your being one with Christ and being beloved as you wait for others to receive. During the week find a short time when you can repeat this exercise. Know that you are loved and therefore that you can love God and neighbour.