

The Baptism of Christ

Tuesday, 12 January 2010

A sermon preached by the chaplain on Sunday 10th January.

Imagine, if you will, that you are living in the year 70AD and in a small Jewish Christian community. The only documents your community would have to tell you about the life of Jesus of Nazareth would be the writings of St Paul and the Gospel of St Mark, this is because none of the others had been written yet. You would know nothing of the birth narratives or Jesus's childhood therefore, and you would open the Gospel to read in the first chapter of the baptism of Jesus by John in the river Jordan. I am sure it would have had a dramatic impact on you. If that were all the evidence you had, you would assume that this baptism was the point that Jesus of Nazareth became the Son of Man – rather than Son of God – and you would have understood this in a very different way, a Jewish way – the Son of Man was an apocalyptic figure (see the book of Daniel) who was to usher in the end of the world; and the Son of God, as Jesus is revealed only much later during his passion, was the inheritor of the throne of David, the expected Messiah, rather than the Greek influenced ideas we have now of the Son of God in a rather more literal way. Of course the Kingdom Jesus announced was not a political kingdom and was not an end of the world scenario, but rather the Kingdom of God which comes to our hearts and minds every day.

Well I suppose we can't put the clock back, but in some ways it is a pity for the Jewish Jesus is I think a much more real person much closer to us in so many ways than the Hellenized Christ of theology. Here at his baptism Jesus is adopted, if you like, by God as his Messiah: he is given his commission to announce the coming of the Kingdom and call people to prepare for it. But all the more remarkably in Mark's Gospel it is only Jesus himself who witnesses the heavens being torn apart and the Spirit coming down on him, it is a private revelation not a clap of thunder. In the other gospels including St Luke's Gospel which we have just heard, everyone sees the heavens open and the dove come down. But I prefer Mark's account - it is very human, and therefore more powerful. Jesus's fuller identity would be revealed only at his passion.

One of the tenets of theology I was taught and still believe is that what you can say about Christ you can say about us too. He is the paradigm for human life, not a magician or a being from outer space, but a real flesh and blood human being. So what we say about his baptism we can say about our own. And if our lives are less heroic, they still bear the commission to announce and usher in the kingdom of God. Of course most of us can't remember our own baptisms, I dread to think what mine was like, but if true to perform I expect it was not easy for everyone else. Even if I had been aware of what was going on, I very much doubt if I would have seen the heavens open. I have not seen them do so since, despite performing a large number of them since. That is not how religion is for us, I think it never was. Our commission is a private revelation, and we may not receive it for a long time. But at some point I hope we all do. An insight that our lives are to be lived in service of others in some kind of way. Think about it for a minute: how many people sitting here feel strongly perhaps passionately about something in their lives - some cause, group of people, some person, some animal, some injustice. Here is our private revelation and the opportunity we have to announce and usher in the kingdom of justice, goodness and love by following this call, this passion.

But of course is this not true of every human being not just baptised ones? Well yes it is, because baptism is not a magic event, it is a sacrament and sacraments are rituals which point us to an internal truth. By engaging in the ritual we are saying we consciously recognise this and wish to live by that truth. Of course as babies we don't know this, so our private revelation must come later in life, but the principle holds good. And if we hold to it, our true identity will later be revealed too: that, like Jesus, we are sons and daughters of God, that our lives are somehow linked to the divine life and in that we are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

So take another look at St Mark, and ponder your own private revelation, your own insight into your own call from God to announce and usher in the Kingdom.