

Though it is not always the case with our usual lectionary, the very choice of readings today itself opens up the possibility of new thoughts about a familiar text from the gospels. In each of the four gospels the public ministry of Jesus begins with an account of his baptism by John, with a slight exception in the gospel of John. And yet the story is not told without embarrassment. Mark – the evangelist of today's gospel reading – is the least apologetic, and Luke follows him pretty closely. In Matthew, however, the Baptist protests and has to be persuaded by Jesus. In the gospel of John, there is no description of the baptism at all; John the Baptist simply testifies to the descent of the Spirit from heaven upon Jesus "like a dove".

Matthew and John seem to reflect a concern in the early church as to why the one believed by the church to be sinless would undergo a washing rite to do with the forgiveness of sin. At the same time, however, they apparently believed that the baptism had taken place and was very important for the understanding of Jesus' ministry, otherwise they could easily simply have omitted it from their accounts.

Many of us feel the same problem today – a *moral* concern as to why Jesus is undergoing the baptism and how this either makes the baptism a sham, or suggests that perhaps Jesus wasn't morally perfect after all. But there is more going on here than meets the eye, and our moral concerns are really quite secondary. The lectionary selection today helps to open this up a bit.

Most striking is the inclusion of the Genesis reading – the account of the first day of creation. What matters most here for making sense of the baptism of Jesus is not the first day itself but what happens "before" the first day:

Genesis 1.1 NRSV *In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, ² the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.*

There are two things to hear in this. The first is the reference to the formless void and the

darkness covering the face of the deep, and the second is the "wind from God" which sweeps over the face of the waters. As straightforward as these images might seem to be, there is a flexibility in translation and interpretation which allows for this scene to be taken as the meaning of the baptism of Jesus. Anthropologists have long noted that a common fear across many human societies has been anxiety about "the deep". "The deep", denoting the formlessness and uncontrollability of wild waters, features in many myths and legends. In the act of creation (according to Genesis) God holds back the waters of the earth and the sky in order to make a safe place for humankind and the rest of creation to inhabit. In our Psalm this morning we heard "The LORD is upon the mighty waters... The LORD sits enthroned above the flood" (Psalm 29). In the much loved Psalm 23 it is beside *still* waters that the LORD leads the poet. The flood of Noah is an account of what happens when God turns away from the world; the passing of Israel through the Red Sea is an account of the opposite.

The deep and the chaotic represent what the world is like in the absence of God. In those opening verses of Genesis, it is said that there is a "wind from God" sweeping over this chaotic and formless deep. The trick here is one of translation, for "wind" can also be translated here as "Spirit", and is translated that way in some English versions of the Bible. To add to that, the word translated as "swept" (...over the waters) has the sense of hovering or "brooding", as a bird might brood over its young.

When these richer images are linked to the baptism of Jesus, there arises the possibility that what is happening between John and Jesus on the banks of the Jordan is rather more than simply one administering a religious rite to another, more than a simple historical account of something which happened to happen. The Spirit which descends or "broods" over Jesus in the midst of the baptismal waters is perhaps no longer a gentle dove alighting upon Jesus' head but the creative spirit of God moving over a broken and chaotic world, bringing God's creative power to bear on what is without real form or content, beginning the process of making it a place of light and life. We might

say that here a new creation is begun. This new creation is Jesus himself, rising from the waters of the Jordan river and about to commence his ministry of good news among God's people. Here is no mere beginning of Jesus only, but a whole new beginning – a new creation. Here – in this one – we see what it would mean to live the life of a truly human creature.

This is say that all those pictures of Jesus' baptism, in which he looks up piously at the gentle bird which alights upon his brow misrepresent what has taken place. Perhaps it would be better if those portrayals showed a great bird filling the sky, John the Baptist falling backwards into the water in awe at what he sees, the river's waters stilled by the Spirit's presence.

Whatever the case about how we visualise the whole event, it becomes clearer now what John means when he declares, "I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit" (Mark 1.8). It is *this* – the baptism with the Holy Spirit – which is the good news of the gospel. For this Spirit is what makes us ourselves, what sets us free and makes us whole. As it is with Jesus, so it is with us – in the power of the Holy Spirit we are made human. And it is this Spirit that Jesus bestows.

But we only can talk of this; for knowing that this is what Jesus bears and does doesn't make it so for us also. The gospel narrative tells us what is promised but not how to get it. As usual with the promises of God, the temptation is strong to presume that the gift is already given – to declare that we are the people of the Spirit – or to try to work to achieve or earn the gift. In both cases we deny the gospel and the very gifted-ness of what God offers. We must begin only with the confidence that Jesus himself bore the Spirit, was made whole by it, and the promise that he will baptise others with it, and pray for such a baptism ourselves.

But we should know what we pray for. Jesus, as the one who bears the Spirit, is indeed the true human being. But this is costly in a world like ours. In Mark's gospel, the very next episode after the baptism of Jesus is the temptation of Jesus. And the language is very strong. The Holy Spirit with which Jesus has been baptised now "casts him out" into the desert.¹ The formless and void world is given

shape in Jesus only then to be cast back into the formless and void wasteland.

To be truly human is not to be happy in a world like this. So much the better when we do find happiness! But this is not the promise. To be truly human in a world like this is to be as free as Jesus shows himself to be in his resistance to the temptations in that desert (at least, as described by Luke and Matthew). To borrow again from Psalm 23, for God's own name's sake he leads us in right paths and anoints us in the presence of the things which would oppress us and limit our humanity. In his baptism Jesus becomes what we should be in the midst of what we are, that we might become what he is – beloved children, pleasing in God's sight.

This is what is begun at Christmas and is completed on Good Friday. This is what is begun in us when God sends us his Spirit.

Let us then, give thanks for the promise of such life, and pray for its realisation in us today. Amen.

¹ The Greek word underlying "cast him into" the desert is the same one used to describe Jesus' exorcisms, or castings out, of demons.