

1st Sunday of Epiphany - 10th January 2021 – The Baptism of Christ

Gen 1:1-5, Ps 29, Acts 19:1-7 Mark 1:4-11

Genesis 1:1-5 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. ³ Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. ⁴ And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. ⁵ God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Psalms 29 Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. ² Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name; worship the Lord in holy splendour. ³ The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over mighty waters. ⁴ The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. ⁵ The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars; the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon. ⁶ He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and Sirion like a young wild ox. ⁷ The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire. ⁸ The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. Give unto the LORD, O ye mighty, give unto the LORD glory and strength. The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare; and in his temple all say, "Glory!" ¹⁰ The Lord sits enthroned over the flood; the Lord sits enthroned as king forever. ¹¹ May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!

Acts 19:1-7 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. ² He said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?" They replied, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." ³ Then he said, "Into what then were you baptized?" They answered, "Into John's baptism." ⁴ Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." ⁵ On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. ⁶ When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— ⁷ altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11 John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." ⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

During Advent, a Hopeweaver Community member suggested I look at, '*Lighted Windows*' by Margaret Silf. It reflected on Scripture and prepared the reader to celebrate Jesus' birth. Margaret's writing however continued until Epiphany, with meditations pondering these words: '*Transforming, Liberating, Nourishing, Empowering, Sending and Returning*'. She explored them as Jesus' gifts to us. I share them with you, in the light of Mark's retelling of Jesus' baptism.

Do you remember when, as a child, you ran ahead of your parents or friends, hid around the corner, jumped out at them and shouted, 'Boo!' You saw them jump, laugh and you ran on into the park... This is how Mark's Gospel begins.

One author suggests Mark's Good News, originally thought to rely on Luke and Matthew, is the most developed and primary of the three. It's oral tradition written down after six decades of repeated use in dispersed homes and gatherings. It's succinct, pared of all but what Mark thought significant. Its aim was not literary or theological but the communication of truth, linked by keywords rather than chronological order. A non-Christian historian, Eusebius, quoted his contemporary, Papias, suggesting this was true.

'But now we must add to the words of his which we have already quoted the tradition which he gives in regard to MARK, the author of the Gospel. It is in the following words: "This also the presbyter said: Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote down accurately, though not indeed in order, whatsoever he remembered of the things done or said by Christ. For he neither heard the Lord nor followed him, but afterward, as I said, he followed Peter, who adapted his teaching to the needs of his hearers, but with no intention of giving a connected account of the Lord's discourses, so that Mark committed no error while he thus wrote some things as he remembered them. For he was careful of one thing, not to omit any of the things which he had heard, and not to state any of them falsely." These things are related by Papias concerning Mark'

Mark's first keyword is 'wilderness'. John's voice, cries aloud in the wilderness. Mark deliberately recalls Genesis, *'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters'*.

'Boo!' It's in the wilderness that cataclysmic changes take place. Mark's Gospel presents Jesus as the new beginning over whom the Spirit of God is moving. John proclaims, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals."

Describing John's prophet-like dress sense and Community based fasting-food, Mark explains John's baptism as washing people who knew they had turned away from God and pronouncing God's forgiveness. Jesus is baptised, not because he had turned away from God but because he had turned towards God in a new and creative way, in Humility and Love. The Spirit again hovered over the face of the waters. When Jesus rises, God's voice is clear: 'You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'. Creation's transformation began; it was, and is, all-embracing, nourishing, inclusive and liberating.

In the light of this, what Jesus did next was extra-ordinary. He remained in that creative Wilderness to go three rounds with the evil inside human hearts. He even told Satan how to mend his relationship with God, thereby reclaiming and repairing the incompleteness's of living life turned away from God.

In February 2014, visiting the Holy Land, I saw the Wilderness of the River Jordan. It seemed an ordinary, even dirty tributary. Pilgrims of all denominations were there because they wanted to be where Jesus had been, do what he did and feel the electrifying atmosphere. Two of our number were baptized; transformative and liberating for them and an empowering experience for my fixed mindset.

Talking of fixed mindsets; it's astonishing what people who follow Jesus don't know, states Luke the author of Acts; another 'Boo!' moment. We heard of 12 disciples who had received John's baptism but who had not heard of the Holy Spirit or that Jesus was the person to whom the Baptist had pointed. Paul explained the full story and laid hands on them to reveal the transformation, liberation and nourishment of the Holy Spirit to empower, to send out and to welcome back.

Boo! The spotlight falls on us. Do we remember the Spirit's touch at or after our baptism or confirmation? Has the Spirit transformed us since then? Liberated us? Empowered us? Nourished us? Sent us out? Returned us to the next part of our story as followers of Jesus' Way? Many times, I am sure.

Margaret Silf concludes that the Gospel is about *'touching peoples' lives with hope and encouragement, and giving them real reason to want to go on living, even though their [wilderness] world feels dark and hopeless. It's about speaking the word that gives freedom – freedom to be real, to speak from the heart, to go beyond the fear, to risk breaking out of the old, outgrown moulds that society and 'religion' can set us into. It's about discovering a deeper layer of vision – of insight – in situations where we can't see our hands in front of us for the fog of bewilderment and confusion. It's about searching for ways to release ourselves and each other from the oppressions of 21st Century.'* [M Silf *'Lighted Windows' page 142*]. Amen to leaving those in the Wilderness.

'Lord, you have revealed your Love to me. You have commissioned me to make that Love a reality in your [wilderness] World. You have anointed me to serve your people and transformed my brokenness into a strand of your wholeness. You have freed me from the captivity of my own self-absorption and you nourish my dreams with your own vision. Keep me rooted in you. Amen' [Margaret Silf]