

January 10th. 2021 Epiphany 1. Baptism of Christ.

Genesis 1, 1-5, Psalm 29, Mark 1, 4-11

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Baptism is an important occasion for many families and it is often followed by a party with family and friends. Parents want the best for their children, so there seems to be the feeling that a young child needs protection in this world and a good start in life; baptism is a sort of rite of passage and promises are made on behalf of young children. Adults, who come to baptism, take a decision and make the promises themselves.

Today's readings stress the activity and initiative of God. In the first reading, the beginning of the creation story, God calls light into existence and imposes order on chaos. Later on, light will be reflected in Jesus, the light of the world. God's lordship is revealed, so God is shown as being intimately involved with this world, and nothing can separate creation from its Creator.

The activity of God is stressed by Mark in his Gospel. Mark's account reveals the identity of Jesus as Son of God and also his authority. There is no mention of the birth of Jesus, as in Luke's Gospel. Various things are picked out. First, Mark begins his Gospel by telling of the preparation for Jesus with John the Baptist. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance, probably representing cleansing or purification, and it is very much like the message of the Old Testament prophets. John's appearance resembles that of Elijah, and his message is similar, too. All this time he is pointing to Jesus. John was a prophet; Jesus is the Saviour. 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me,' he says. More powerful or mightier is used to refer to a supernatural being.

The awkward question is why Jesus should be baptised by John. Was he seeking forgiveness for sins? Surely not. The other awkward question is that the baptism puts Jesus in an inferior position to John. But what comes out of this is that Jesus identifies with his people and reveals the humility with which he was born and, incidentally, the humility, which characterised his mother, Mary. This event looks forward to his relationship and dealing with all people. Jesus' baptism, therefore, marks a real beginning to the Gospel story.

When Jesus is baptised, something strange happens. Mark suggests that it is only Jesus who sees and hears it. No one else shares this first experience. What he sees is heaven torn apart. Later, at the crucifixion,

the curtain of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom. So, as at the creation, heaven and earth are united.

The voice also is addressed to Jesus himself. It occurs again on the Mountain of Transfiguration, and similar words are used. It assures him who he is and how the Father sees him. It is seen again in the experience of Paul on the road to Damascus.

This sets the scene for how Jesus' teaching and work will be seen and how people came to understand what it all meant.

What the voice says recalls Psalm 2: I will proclaim the decree of the Lord; he said to me, 'You are my Son; this day have I begotten you.'

This is one of the psalms used during the coronation of a king.

The voice is a strong, visionary experience, as seen in Psalm 29:

The voice of the Lord splits the flash of lightning; the voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness; the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.

The voice of the Lord makes the oak trees writhe and strips the forests bare; in his temple all cry, 'Glory!'

In the end, the centurion says after the crucifixion, 'Truly this man was God's Son!'

When we are baptised, we become children of God. In John's Gospel, during the long discourse when Jesus prepares his disciples for carrying on his work after he has left them, he tells them that they are no longer servants, but friends.

It is God's initiative, God telling us who we are and what he wants us to do. At our baptism we receive God's grace and strength to do it. So, we are set free, like the first disciples, to be the children and friends of God and to reveal his love and presence in this world. So, we say at the end of the baptism service, when we give a lighted candle: You have received the light of Christ; walk in this light all the days of your life. Shine as a light in the world to the glory of God the Father.

In Psalm 29, the heavenly bodies are exhorted to praise the glory of God's name, his presence:

'Ascribe to the Lord, you powers of heaven, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the honour due to his name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.'

That is our job in this New Year, a fitting resolution, to bear witness to that new light.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

