

Mark 1:4-11

Baptised with Jesus

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christmas is now officially finished. The twelve days ended on Tuesday, and we are now in the season of Epiphany. Epiphany comes from a Greek word which means 'appearance' or 'manifestation', and in the church it marks the revelation to the world of God incarnate as Jesus Christ. The gospel reading for the actual day of Epiphany is the visit by the Magi, the wise men. The incarnation was revealed to them by the appearance of a new star in the heavens. And today, the First Sunday after Epiphany, the gospel reading is the baptism of Jesus, where the identity of Jesus is revealed, not by a star in the heavens, but by the heavens themselves being torn open, and the voice of God declaring that Jesus is the Son of the heavenly Father.

It's not often that the heavens are torn open, that the spiritual realm breaks into this physical realm, so this is quite a significant event. In the ancient Hebrew worldview, the supernatural and the natural, or the spiritual and the physical, or the heavens and the earth, whichever names you want to use, are so closely bound up that at points they touch and the separation between them is quite thin. The Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and then in the temple in Jerusalem was one such place. That's why there were guards and priests, blood and altars, washing bowls and thick curtains. They were all there to mediate the touchpoint between two worlds. And what separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple was this huge curtain, called the veil, with embroidered symbols depicting the cosmos. It's as if the world of God was hidden just behind this world that we can see and experience. But we mortals have no ability to go from our side to God's.

So, when, at the baptism of Jesus, God tears open the heavens, this is important. It reveals that there is no longer an impassable barrier that separates us from God. The good news of great joy that we heard on Christmas day is now manifested to the world here at the Baptism of Jesus. Jesus is the sign, the proof, of God reconciling himself to the world. He is revealed as God's righteous beloved son, and as true God and true man. He is God in man made manifest. The birth of Jesus and the tearing open of the heavens now gives us Jesus as the only who one could truly claim to be free from sin, to be holy and righteous, and to now stand in the gap between sinful humanity and a just and righteous God.

Instead of God looking upon the world and seeing the sinfulness of humanity, God now looks upon the world and sees the righteousness of Jesus. All cause for God's divine displeasure and wrath, which is truly just, dissipates as Jesus becomes our righteousness. The beloved Son stands in the gap between heaven and earth and shields humanity from the judgment and death and destruction it deserves. And Jesus does this by taking on himself the sin and guilt of all people in his own death on the cross.

Scripture tells us that in our baptism we are united with the death and resurrection of Jesus, and that we now share in his life. We now share in his divine favour of being the beloved Son of God. St Paul says in Galatians chapter three, 'for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.' When God declares to Jesus, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased", that declaration rests on us as well. And this phrase is also quite rich with biblical meaning. Saying 'you are my son' recalls Psalm 2 which speaks of God's promised Messiah, the anointed king.

This fulfilment was actually preached in the early church. In the book of Acts, when Paul and Barnabas were in Antioch, part of Paul's sermon to the crowd said this:

We bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising Jesus; as also it is written in the second psalm, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.' As to his raising him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, 'I will give you the holy promises made to David.' Therefore he has also said in another psalm, 'You will not let your Holy One experience corruption.'

God had promised King David that he would raise his offspring to rule over Israel forever, and that God's relationship to this new king would be as a father to a son. And this is also seen in the story of Abraham and Isaac. God speaks of Isaac as Abraham's only son, as he is the one born of the promise. The prophet Isaiah also speaks in similar language, telling of the spirit of God resting on the promised King of Israel and the servant in who God delights.

So really, what we get here at the baptism of Jesus is God telling us of the fulfilment of all that had come before. Jesus is revealed the servant of God, who will offer his life as a sacrifice. Like Isaac, he is the son of promise, a promise that nothing, not even death, can break. In fact, it is precisely through his death and resurrection that Jesus' sonship and messiahship will be confirmed, and God's promises fulfilled. And the Spirit is at work in all of this.

According to Peter, in his resurrection, Jesus received the Holy Spirit from the Father, and thus his installation as Messiah was complete. And because Jesus has received the Holy Spirit from the Father, he can give the Holy Spirit to those who believe in him. So, John the Baptist's promise that the "more powerful one" would baptise with the Holy Spirit is also fulfilled. Scripture testifies that those who are baptised in Jesus' name receive the Holy Spirit, become sons and daughters of God, and share in Jesus' destiny of death and resurrection.

This is a great reminder that Jesus is not only our Lord, but also our brother. He was baptised, just as we are. He shares in our humanity. Although Jesus is the eternal Son of God and our Lord, he is not these in a selfish way that hoards the Father's inheritance for himself. We do not need to envy him in the way that Joseph's brothers envied Joseph, because Jacob favoured him. Just as Joseph's humiliation by his own brothers and subsequent exaltation when God made Joseph a lord of Egypt ultimately led to the brothers' sharing in Joseph's prosperity, so too the rejection and death of Jesus ultimately becomes the source of our prosperity. Prosperity in the sense of the giving of the Holy Spirit, becoming co-heirs with Christ and children of the Father, and the great gift of eternal life.

There is also a reminder, of course, that our baptisms call us to conform our lives to Jesus, and to live our lives under the cross, to suffer with Jesus that we may also be glorified with Jesus. As I said earlier in the service before our confession of sin, this means we should keep on drowning the old nature we were born with. All that is selfish and sinful in us needs to repeatedly be put to death. And the new nature that God has given us in baptism is repeatedly given life. This is all only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, but as co-heirs with Christ, we have his gift of the Holy Spirit.

We have our new beginning. We belong to the new creation. Just as God spoke the original creation into being, God has spoken into our lives. We are his dearly beloved children. On account of Christ, he is well pleased with us. And by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we live in his grace and favour.

So, thanks be to God for this great and wonderful gift to us. Jesus has been revealed to all the world as the promised Messiah, as the Lord who brings Salvation, and by God's grace he has set us free from sin death and given us life with him forever. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.