

## After forgiveness, what next? Mark 1:4-11

Today is the day in the church calendar when we think about the baptism of Jesus.

Or, After Forgiveness, What Next?

Jesus's baptism is clearly a very significant moment in his life and ministry since all four gospel writers cover it in their accounts. Well, to be fair, John does rather skirt over the actual baptism by not mentioning it at all, but towards the end of his first chapter he clearly relates something of the same incident. And the reason they all mention it is because it has something important to say to us.

Mark's account is the shortest. In typical fashion Mark quickly gives us the bare essentials - boom, boom, boom. In fact he describes the baptism of Jesus in just 53 words in the Greek.

But our gospel reading does not start there. It starts with John "in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Yes, and this is where it all begins, "the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" as Mark writes in the very first verse of his gospel.

And it is where it begins for us too, isn't it? It is repentance - turning away from sinful ways of life - repentance and the forgiveness of our sins that bring us into faith in Christ.

In recognition of this we have already had opportunity this morning to confess our sins and acknowledge God's forgiveness.

But maybe we need to ask ourselves whether this is, in fact, only as far as we get. Just like many of those who went out to John from the Judean countryside some of whom must have returned to their everyday lives afterwards without taking it any further. Or like the disciples that Paul met in Ephesus (Acts 19) who knew only the baptism of John. We should ask ourselves "Are we the same?"

John himself didn't think it should end there. Because the last prophet of the Old Testament era proceeds to prophesy: "I have baptised you with water; but he (the Messiah) will baptise you with the Holy Spirit."

And so Mark launches straight into the baptism of Jesus without preamble, without mentioning, as Matthew does, that John deemed baptising Jesus inappropriate and tried to deter him.

And this is where we can get hung up, isn't it? The impropriety of Jesus being baptised for the forgiveness of sins. And it is maybe the reason why John the apostle did not record the baptism by John the Baptist in his gospel. Because why should the "one who knew no sin" be baptised by the one who was practising a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins?

There are various theories, as you would expect. To identify with us sinners is the one I personally have encountered most often, or as an example for us to follow, or even a suggestion that Jesus deliberately chose to be baptised in order to set up what follows.

I think that the best way to think about it is as an enacted parable. In being baptised Jesus enacts what he wants us to experience. Which is what leads me to ask After Forgiveness, What Next?

Forgiveness is such an astonishing thing for a holy God to offer that we may be tempted to ask "Could there be anything more than forgiveness?" When we try our best to follow the teachings of Jesus, regularly confess our sins and obtain forgiveness, the Christian life seems to work pretty well doesn't it?

But is this approach to "the daily round, the common task" really enough to "bring us daily nearer God" as the hymn writer John Keble put it? Doesn't there have to be more? More to take us closer into God? More to take God closer to the community around us?

There was more for Jesus. Three things happened for Jesus that can happen for us too. Three things that were immediately perceived by Jesus. "He saw" writes Mark in verse 10.

He saw two connected things. First he saw the heavens torn apart. Isaiah 64:1 declares, in a situation where the people have sinned and angered God "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." The good news is that through Jesus they were.

The heavens have been torn open for us. We have direct access to God! He has come down to us, to be with us.

The second thing that Jesus saw was the Holy Spirit descending like a dove upon him, presumably through the now open heavens.

Isn't it interesting that Jesus was sent the Holy Spirit just before his public itinerant ministry began? I find it difficult to believe that Jesus didn't already have the Holy Spirit but somehow he needed this extra anointing. John says that he saw the Spirit descending on Jesus and remaining on him. And I guess maybe Jesus needed to see it too, to have confidence in the presence of Holy Spirit power as he entered his ministry.

Luke is the gospel writer that most associates the power of the Holy Spirit with Jesus's life and ministry. He writes that Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit" after returning from the Jordan and that, after the temptations in the wilderness, Jesus "filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee." And, of course, it was in Galilee, in the synagogue in Nazareth, that Jesus chose to read from Isaiah 61:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

This is just what he did in his three years of ministry. He needed the power of the Spirit to fulfil his assignment.

What, or rather who, is the Holy Spirit? He is many things, part of the Trinity for one. He is God in us. He is God on the move. Things happen when the Holy Spirit is in play. In Genesis 1 we read "in the beginning... a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." The word translated "wind" in the NRSV could also be translated as breath or spirit. The Spirit of God moving over the face of the waters in some translations, bringing creation into being.

I find it fascinating that the lectionary compilers chose to put together today's three Bible readings, each one mentioning the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit. He is central.

So did you notice in our reading from Acts, that Paul expected Christian believers to be aware that they have received the Holy Spirit. 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' he asked. Now all Christians have Holy Spirit inside them, it is not possible to be a Christian without, but Paul is suggesting that believers should have a perceptible expression of Holy Spirit in their lives.

Why should that be? Well, we too are called to minister the kingdom of God to those around us. We are called to do what Jesus did and we need the power that Jesus had to do it. So too do we need the confidence of knowing that God is with us.

How might we recognise the Holy Spirit in our lives? For the disciples in Ephesus it was speaking in tongues and prophesying. For others it might be different spiritual gifts as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 12: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (v.7).

For all of us it should be the effect of the Holy Spirit in our lives as Helper, Comforter, generator of the fruit of the Spirit of which Paul writes in Galatians (5:22-23).

The third thing at Jesus's baptism was the assurance of God's love for him. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." I am sure that Jesus knew this already but to have it affirmed would be a real boost. To know that he could be confident of his Father's love and backing must have been a comfort to Jesus as he began his ministry. He was human after all!

Paul writes in Romans (5:5) "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." This is so important to appreciate, at least in some measure. We know it with our heads don't we? But Paul says that the Holy Spirit pours it into our hearts. Do we experience that? Do we know in the core of our being that God loves us?

Which brings me to what was likely to be the predominant reason for what followed Jesus's baptism.

He was being commissioned by his Father for his imminent ministry in a very public way that affirmed his authority.

Jesus gave his disciples a similar commission after his resurrection, to be affirmed by the gift of the power of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. And our mission, should we choose to accept it, is to "Go... and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded us."

For that we shall need both the assurance of God's love to save us from feeling that we have to perform, to be successful, in order to earn his love, and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring the kingdom of God near to those in the community. The filling of Holy Spirit is the key to both.

The bible instructs us to "go on being filled with the Holy Spirit" (Ephesians 5:18). It is not a one off but a continual topping up process, as we see with the early disciples in the book of Acts.

So, at the start of this New Year let us set ourselves to draw near to God and know more of that fullness of Holy Spirit. Amen

*Chris Shaw* 10 January 2021