

Epiphany: The Baptism of Jesus: 'Learning from the past' All-Age Service

We began our worship this morning by singing a song that expressed thanks for the everlasting gift that the birth and life of Jesus offers us; 'O what a gift, what a wonderful gift, let us praise the wonder of the Lord'. Most of us were taught as children to express thanks for our Christmas gifts by writing 'Thank You' letters. Out of the blue, this Christmas, I received a card from a cousin containing what appeared to be a 'Thank You' letter of mine sent to an aunt in my primary school days. I was horrified at first reading: it had a few spelling mistakes, that had clearly been corrected but the handwriting was immaculate and the text aptly expressed thanks for a book received, even quoting highlights to show I had read and enjoyed it. The shock was the way I had cheekily signed off-

"Au revoir old dear and Bob's your flippin uncle!
Nev"

There had to be an explanation: the year was not stated but I was probably 9 or 10 at the time so tender years were no excuse. But the day given was, Sept 6th: a month too early for a birthday thank you and way too late for Christmas so another context was required. I suspect this was not a genuine 'Thank You' letter but probably school homework and I had relieved the tedium by trying to be funny at the end. My aunt may have treasured it because it showed that a spirited nephew was thinking of her. She died 30 or so years ago but the letter had laid hidden all this time and only just seen the light of day.

I tell you this because its worth remembering that the scriptures we read each Sunday also only came to light in bits and pieces, a 100 or more years after they were written. Carbon dating can give us a rough date of composition, usually somewhere between the 1st & 4th C. Amendments and redactions can normally be spotted by careful comparison of texts from different centuries. Authenticity can be verified by scientific analysis of inks and parchments. I tell you this because I am going to depart from convention this morning by comparing the account of Jesus' baptism in Luke (Lk 3 v 15-22, omitting v 19-20) with one from a non-biblical source that is different, uplifting to some but hard to verify. Note in passing that the omitted verses were about Herod imprisoning John The Baptist and show how the powerful have always tried to suppress teachings that threaten their interests and powerbase.

For Christmas this year, I received two books about gospels allegedly written by Mary Magdalene. Most Christians have never heard of these gospels because they were excluded from the canon of scripture: that exclusion was probably a reflection of misogyny amongst the early church fathers rather than heresy.

The books had been recommended by the former organizer of further education for non-stipendiaries, Ken Webb: one, 'The Gospel of Mary', was written by Prof. Karen King, of Harvard University Divinity School, and published in 2006: she had painstakingly translated fragments of parchment that only came to light 100 years previously. Ten years later the author had to confess that her source was unreliable and the fragments she had spent years translating were a forgery! There was other fragmentary evidence that such a gospel had been written but her copy was not from it! She had not subjected her text to the customary checks

The other book, 'The Gospel of The Beloved Companion', also attributed to Mary Magdalene, is a different kettle of fish. It begins with a prologue and account of John The Baptist's ministry that matches, almost word-for-word, the opening chapters of John's gospel. The prophecy of Jesus' coming forward to be baptized is also similar to the one we have just read from Luke but then accounts diverge. In the Gospel of The Beloved Companion "4;1-2" (as with the canonical gospels, the originals were written without subdivision into chapter and verse) say:

1. 'The next day, Yohanan saw Yeshua and the woman called Miryam of Bethany, in the land of Judah, coming toward him and said "Behold the son of humanity who will put right the wrong in the world! This is the one of whom I said, 'after me comes a man who was before me, for before me, he was'. I did not know him but for this reason I came baptizing with water: that he would be revealed to Israel.
2. And Yohanan testified saying 'In a vision, I have seen the spirit descending like a dove out of the sky, and she remained upon him and I did not know him but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me 'the one on whomsoever you see the spirit descending and resting, he is the same who will baptise in the spirit' and I have seen and testified that this is the true son of humanity.'

There are clear similarities to Luke's account but there are four notable differences

1. The location is Judah, close to Qumram, not Galilee.
2. The presence of Mary Magdalene, walking by the Jordan with Jesus.
3. The description of Jesus as the Son of Humanity, not God.
4. The settling of a dove on Jesus comes to John in a vision rather than from heaven, accompanied by God's voice.

Do these differences matter? I think they do. Nowadays, Mary's account is likely to be believed by far more people than that of Luke, who had already shown in his nativity story an inclination to 'hype'. The same can be said about the whole Gospel but can we trust it? Cynthia Bourgeault, highly respected Scottish Episcopal priest and retreat leader says: 'if this is a fake it is a divinely inspired creation!'

The Gospel of The Beloved Companion had been preserved by a Christian sect of Mary sympathisers, the Cathars in SW France, and was well established there by the 11th C. Rome saw them as such a serious threat to 'orthodoxy' that in the 13th C, the paradoxically named Pope Innocent III instigated a persecution of the Cathars that lasted 150 years and decimated their ranks. There will be those in church hierarchies today who would prefer to see Mary's gospel remain in the shadows.

Today's preachers have a duty to 'open up the word' but which words should we expound on? In going beyond the envelope of the canonical gospels this morning, I have gone beyond the conventional 'Word'. Has it made any difference to the way I view the significance of Jesus baptism and subsequent life? I remain thankful that Jesus was baptised but now open to the possibility that he was encouraged by his close companion, Mary Magdalene, probably the mysterious "Disciple Whom Jesus Loved" but whose name dare not be spoken. I remain thankful that Jesus had learned from the past errors of his Jewish nation and plotted an alternative path to follow: a path of sacrificial love. I remain thankful that the path led him to preach truth to power. I am now more convinced and feel 'outsiders' would be too, that Jesus' path is a unique way to become truly human and bring salvation to the world's poor and oppressed. My gratitude demands not just a token renewal of baptismal vows, something that we Christians sometimes do at this season, but my

undivided attention and commitment to the path Jesus opted for that day: I hope it may do the same for you.

Neville