

BIBLE READINGS

Genesis 1:1-5

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. ² Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. ³ And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴ God saw that the light was good, and he 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.

Mark 1:4-11

⁴ And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. ⁶ John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. ⁸ I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

The Baptism and Testing of Jesus

⁹ At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Reflection by John Shaw

Each of the four Gospels begins in their own unique manner. Matthew, for example, starts with a lengthy genealogy of Jesus. But Mark jumps right into the fray and opens on the banks of the river Jordan, as Jesus is baptized. And it is this baptism that we focus on today. The story invites us to reflect not only on what baptism meant for Jesus, but on what it means for us too.

Now we might find it difficult to explain what happened to Jesus in the Jordan, but however you see it there is a big change in his life from this time on. *Immediately* (Mark likes that word!) following his baptism, Jesus is challenged in the desert. Within another 7 verses of Mark's Gospel, we've got people giving up their jobs to follow him. Within 13 verses we've got demons screaming at him in the synagogue. Within 17 verses we've got the news spreading all over Galilee. Within 34 verses he can no longer enter a town openly. Within 41 verses he is being accused of blasphemy. And within 62 verses we've got the Pharisees and the Herodians plotting to kill him.

Mark is calling for us to undergo the same sort of dramatic transformation in our lives so that we too can be transformed and become agents of transformation in the world around us. "You are my son, the beloved. In you I delight." This is the same voice that speaks over each and every one of us in our baptisms, saying, "You are my child, my beloved, in whom I delight."

But it is not spoken just so that we can say, "Oh, that's nice, I'm a child of God." It is spoken so that we might follow in the footsteps of the Son. The same Spirit that descended and alighted on Jesus at his baptism is given to us. . . . and for the same reason. Baptism is for every follower of Jesus to the mission of Jesus. And in the current lockdown that Mission of love, compassion and forgiveness is even more vital.

And we are given the Spirit for the same purpose as Jesus. Jesus was given the Spirit for the sick whom he healed. We are given the Spirit so that, being healed, we may lead others to healing. Jesus was given the Spirit for the sinners whose sins he forgave. We are given the Spirit so that as we realise how utterly dependent, we are on his mercy, we may offer forgiveness and mercy to others. Yes, all vital roles in this third lockdown.

If we desire a life dedicated to following the living God, as we work together to build God's kingdom here in Harwich/Dovercourt/Parkeston and Ramsey and Little Oakley, then the place to start is at the water's edge. (How fitting for us on this peninsula). From there, find a good pair of shoes and a sturdy walking stick (allowed under your daily permitted exercise) because the journey has just begun, and the work of the Kingdom is far too urgent to wait.
Amen.