

WATER FOR ALL LENT 1 – Year B Mark 1:9 - 11

It's hot and people are walking towards the desert. Word has got around that a holy man called John is performing some ritual cleansing in the Jordan. It's 35 kms from Jerusalem to the Jordan travelling east past Bethany and Jericho to just north of the Dead Sea. A Sabbath day's journey was less than half a mile, so it was quite a trek. The travellers would need water and something to eat.

What's all this for? John, Jesus first cousin, has been living in the desert working out what God wants him to do. He's a bit of a crank really, wearing camel skin clothes and existing on the protein of locust, the sugar of wild honey and moist river water. But it was what he said that arrested everyone. 'Your greatest need is to **repent** of your sins.'

Still the same today. Civilisation, as we know it, must repent – must feel deep regret for past conduct as to change one's mind and actions. Not enough to say sorry – the words have to result in real practical responses. And it must begin with us – the people who follow Jesus. Only then can we expect to experience the blessing of God in our lives and those of others.

We all need symbols to remind us of important experiences. John used the Jordan water to imprint it on his hearers. The Jews were used to ritual cleansing. Psalm 26v6 says, 'I will wash my hands in innocence; so I will encompass thine altar.' or 'I scrub my hands with purest soap, then join hands with others in the great circle, dancing around your altar, O God.' What if we did that today – in church!

The Gospel for this church year is Mark. The Greek word for gospel is *euvangelion* and it means 'a good message which changes the possibilities'. Modern scholarship believes that it was written in close consultation with Peter, and Mark wrote it in the Greek of the trading towns. He might have come from a well-heeled business family. One of the crucial things to note that it is not the miracles that drive Mark's writing, but the person, Jesus, around whom it all revolved. Mark is interested in **relationship**. I think he's right. Christianity is, to my mind worthless unless there is relationship involved – with God and with each other.

What's John saying?

'This baptism is only the beginning. The real action comes next. The star in this drama, to whom I'm a mere stagehand, will change your life. I'm baptizing you here in the river, turning your life into kingdom life. A holy baptism from the Spirit of God will change you from the inside out.' What are you talking about John – the sun's got to you. What's kingdom life? It's the new way that you will discover as you follow the one called Jesus, son of Joseph the carpenter. As you follow him, he will baptize you with God's Spirit! True? Yes!

Next thing the Man himself appears. It's this rabbi teacher Jesus. We've heard of him. What's going to happen now? Good heavens, he's asking John to baptize him now! Everyone's eyes were glued to sight of the hippie prophet pouring water onto Jesus. But, hang on a bit I must be seeing things. There's a dove hovering over Jesus as he comes out of the water and, wait, I can hear something. 'You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love. You are the pride of my life – the apple of my eye.'
I think it's God speaking, it's giving me goose bumps.

Jesus, as a man felt the need to be baptized. So what should it mean for us? I'm referring to both immersion and sprinkling. The writer to the Romans says, 'Baptism means that the old way is left behind and the new place of **grace** is entered into.' The early church baptized whole families. Today, parents and godparents promise to surround the child with Christian living and the child is accepted into the church family. For adult baptism people answer for themselves while confirmation does that for other faith communities. I have learnt that, having been brought up a Baptist, it is not the **means** of baptism that is of prime importance but the intent of the baptized and believer. Like Mark, it's not the miracle that's important it's the person of Jesus.

Rowan Williams* writes, 'At the very beginning of creation there was watery chaos. The Holy Spirit was hovering like a wind and out of the watery chaos comes the world. And God says, 'This is good.' Aha, it's the water and the Spirit and the voice – just like Jesus' baptism. 'If being baptized is being led to where Jesus is then it is being led towards the chaos and needs of humanity. A baptized Christian ought to be somebody who is not afraid of looking at the chaos inside themselves as well as taking in humanity at risk outside. Baptism is being in the neighbourhood of other Christians. Baptism takes us to where Jesus is – where people are hurting and where we together can offer love and care.'

That's why these combined services are so important to us all. God's water is for all – no matter our background or our foreground. No matter if we're feeling off-colour, hindered by age and infirmity, not sure about church stuff, not confident about our own faith and service. Don't worry – that's God's business. Just ask him to dip you in his holy water and to give you a big drink of his love everyday.

And if we're puzzled by prayer and feel inadequate, Rowan Williams says that it's just like sneezing. You just have to!

May God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit cause us to sneeze with gratitude.
BLESS YOU!

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*Being Christian by Rowan Williams

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