

The Baptism Of Jesus

Deeply embedded in Mark's story of the baptism of Jesus' are what we might call, deep hints, perhaps raw allusions, boldly aimed at the Gospel's readers. God's dramatic acknowledgment of Jesus makes it clear that through the words and deeds of Jesus we humans are encountering not only divinity in the person of Jesus, but also a call to faith that echos through all creation. The caller is God. We should note that we are the ones being called. We should also note that the lack of creedal statements here; and the lack of specific religious language. This tells us to listen carefully. The call of God may not contain the annotations of a carefully crafted call by the Church, but this encounter, as brought to us by Mark, echoes the longing of God. The informed reader, may well experience many of the cadences as echos from past events. Although the passage does not employ the later creedal terminology of divine and human natures, theologians have long read it as a clue to the meaning of the doctrine of the incarnation.¹ Now, it is one thing for me to say this as I have, but it quite another thing for some readers to grasp. What they might say, are these deep hints?² What is a cadence?³

¹ BARRETT, L., "Theological Perspective on Mark 1:4–11", *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year B* (ed. D. L. BARTLETT – B. B. TAYLOR) (Louisville, KY 2008) I, 236.

² Deep hints are allusions. They point to past events with very special meanings.

³ A cadence in this usage, is a recurring theme or rhythm. In music, it is a closing statement. In this usage, a cadence could be an embedded phrase that acts as a sign that the passage to which it is attached is about to close safely. In the book of Daniel, allusions abound. To articulate the

Let me tell you a story that comes from my time as the vicar of The Church of the Epiphany.

The story began, about 10:00pm, with an anxious call from a senior nurse at the hospital. "Please could you come to the hospital theatre immediately. We have patient who is about to go for an urgent caesarean. Sadly, her baby is not expected to survive."

I dropped everything and presented myself at the operating theatre in short order. I was promptly gowned up and taken into the theatre itself. In a light-hearted aside, the surgeon asked me if I was the father. I responded, "in a manor of speaking".

Thus the baby was taken from it's mother's womb, and immediately a second team began work on her (the baby) in the ante-theatre. The lead doctor said to me, "you just go ahead with your blessing of the baby, but we have to keep our procedure going." So it was, that with consecrated oil, I anointed the baby in the midst of an environment of clatter and urgency. The expectancy that the baby might still be lost, hovered over the event in a particularly unique way. For a priest to be included in this scene in this way, had to be considered as most unusual. On the other hand, one could describe the two medical teams and the priest, as a gathered team, called by God, to minister in a

implications intended by the authors, "things are bad and they are going to get worse, but we are nearly there. It is going to be okay!"

special way as a new life experienced difficult beginnings.

Shortly after midnight, the lead doctor called in the rescue helicopter and the baby was flown to Wellington. The baby not only survived the birthing drama, but as we would later discover, she would grow into a healthy and vibrant lass. To this day I still consider that though it was a nurse who called me, yet in a deeper sense, I would say that it was God who called me. It was also God, I consider, who breathed into the whole event and made it possible for a team to form and transform a very difficult situation into a very special event. No one person or small group of people should be promoted into some form of accolade. It was a team event that included the presence of God.

Now let me address the Baptism of Jesus and one or two similar events in the Bible. In particular, there are some images that I want you see.

The Baptism of Jesus took place in the wilderness. All three of the synoptic evangelists agree, that this event, signalled the beginning of the messianic age.⁴ It also highlighted a metaphor that needs to be explained.

In Genesis we read of the new creation. In this new creation, mankind is to live in the shelter of the Garden of Eden. Here is the idyllic expression of both unity and faith. As long as Adam and Eve are

⁴ The new beginning signalled in this Baptism is to be seen as the beginning of the Messianic age

faithful to God, they will live eternally in the protection of God's love. They didn't stay faithful however and thus had to leave the garden. You could image the two different environments, as 'living in the Kingdom' (Living in the Garden) and 'Living in the wilderness'. (expelled from the Garden)

Also in Genesis, we encounter the story of Noah and the Ark. Here, the imagery portrays God as being unhappy that his created beings are living in the wilderness. (Mis-behaving) He therefore sends a flood to 'wash away' the unfaithful. The same waters that wash away sinfulness, are the waters of baptism as God's chosen few, (Noah and his family) are symbolically carried back to the garden to live in the eternal protection of God's love.

In the escape of the Hebrew people from Egypt,⁵ we see once again, the leaving of a very difficult situation (Slavery and oppression = Wilderness?). The crossing of the Red Sea is often related as a kind of baptism through which the Hebrew people pass to freedom. Their oppressors however are destroyed by the same waters through which the Hebrews escaped.⁶

This new beginning for them (the Hebrews) is not unlike Noah's new beginning. Missing from the Red Sea experience, is the rainbow. Like

⁵ Exodus 12:7ff

⁶ The same waters in each event, Noah and the Exodus, bringing salvation to one group and disaster to another, fits the concept of a cadence. You could say in a modern jargon, "this is a familiar tune .

Noah however, The waters that part and set the Hebrews on their journey to freedom, are the same waters that will then close over their oppressors and wash them away.

Then we jump to Mark's account of the Baptism of Jesus. Jesus goes out into the wilderness to be Baptised.. The same imagery appears again. In the wilderness, (away from the clatter and stresses of a secular environment) Jesus begins his ministry. First he will go to the lake-side to gather a team. Together, they will preach the Kingdom and learn that faith is not a set of rules, or nodding acquiescence, but a particular way of being.

And so we return to the drama of the hospital event I talked of earlier. If we allow ourselves to see in pictures, we could talk of anxiety and a lostness that hovered over the scene. Medical staff had painted a bleak image for the family. They expected to lose the baby. Symbolically, we are talking about a 'wilderness'. The outcome however was dramatically different. The best word now is, 'salvation'.

Now per chance you, as my listeners, are wondering if I am questioning the way we do Baptisms in the Church. The answer is no, not at all. What I am saying however, is that we should be open to understanding the deeper images that have embedded themselves as metaphors, in the story of God's journey with his created people and in our Baptismal Liturgies..

It is also important to recognise that not all baptisms involve water. So for instance, when Jesus says; "But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!"⁷ he is ultimately alluding to the crucifixion. The resurrection will become a hinge-point in history, but there cannot be a resurrection without a death.

And so it is with us as well. Our baptism, be it water or an encounter with God is symbolically the beginning of a new life. (Immersed into life in Christ). However, we cannot begin that new life until we have let go of those elements of our old life that have created a chasm between us and God.

To this point, we have laboured through an explanation of various encounters with God. We have seen that when we talk of baptism, it's meaning goes much deeper than water in a baptismal font or a larger pool for immersion. Given that we always work with visual symbols, and that includes all the elements of water baptism and a liturgy that embraces promises, we can now look back at the baptism of Jesus and confidently say, this was the beginning of the messianic age. God's eternal longing has boiled to the top. His Son has become one among us. He will echo His father's eternal call. We are the people He will call. We are wanted in the garden. We must not miss the call.

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The Holy Bible: New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI 1984) Lk 12:50.