

I Epiphany  
January 29, 2009  
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## “Baptism of the Lord”

St. Mark's Gospel begins with a cry. It is the cry of John the Baptist proclaiming the coming of the Messiah. Other Gospels tell stories of the birth of Jesus or in John's case begin with a prologue. Mark is different; he begins in the wilderness, the home of Israel as a nomadic people for 400 years. Out of this wilderness strides John the Baptist, the symbol of one thousand years of the Old Testament prophecy. John represents all that is good in Judaism; truth, justice, holiness of life. He also stands in stark contrast to everything that was wrong with establishment religion of his day.

The cry of John at the river Jordan brings to an end the Old Testament and heralds in the new era of the Kingdom of the Christ.

Scholars tell us that the whole of Mark's Gospel fits between the cry of John the Baptist at the Jordan and the last cry of Jesus on the cross. It is a pungent and poignant gospel with no frills. Mark's Gospel is short and hard hitting. It is often called the Gospel of discipleship and even the Gospel of pain.

Mark depicts Jesus coming up out of the water after being baptized by John in the Jordan. At that moment his ministry begins. It begins in a Trinitarian way with the father and the Holy Spirit blessing this beginning at the banks of the Jordan. Mark believes that this moment was so important that it is here he chooses to begin. It is a moment of theophany forcing us to think back into the Old Testament about other great moments where God makes his presence known, Abraham and Moses both come to mind.

Mark will repeat this scene before Jesus' trial and death, when he appears on the mountain with Moses and Elijah at the transfiguration.

What I like about this Gospel is its stark reality. The shepherds and kings of Luke and Matthew's nativity stories are gone and we have the young Jesus coming down to the Jordan to be baptized. It's a kind of consecration.

There is no theological reason why Jesus needs to be baptized. It is Paul who tells us that he is baptized because he chose to be like us and in doing so he embraces our humanity and takes on the burden of our sin.

Both Mark and Paul are convinced that Jesus' mission as Messiah is so different from what the Jews expected. For Paul Jesus is the sacrificial Lamb of God right from the start. His mission is to show mankind a way through suffering and pain by embracing it. He is in every sense the suffering messiah.

In the early 16 hundreds the Reformers of the Protestant Reformation were so convinced that Christ would not identify in any way with the pomp and circumstance of the Roman church that they strove to return in their reform to the early church and the real Jesus of the Gospels. Nowhere is the true suffering of Jesus more graphically depicted than in the artwork of great German painters such as Grunewald and Cranach. In 1525 Grunewald painted centerpiece panels for a church in Isenheim. The great panels in three pieces were painted on all six sides. It became one of the unforgettable images of the whole of reformation art, Jesus broken and scared nailed twisted to the cross. So graphic is Jesus' suffering that it has been described as a merciless and ghastly depiction of Christ's suffering.

To the right of the crucified Christ Grunewald has painted the figure of John the Baptist reading from the Old Testament while pointing directly at the dying figure of Jesus. He is clearly saying: "See did I not tell you? It was for this season that he came into the world, that the world might be saved through him."

Today the liturgy invites us all to set out on this journey with Jesus as he begins his ministry. The Gospel reminds us of Baptism and our own commitment. In starting out on this liturgical journey with Jesus' ministry we are challenged to mirror his pastoral concern for the poor, the sick and the disadvantaged. That's what Baptism truly calls us to, to follow Jesus and his way and to emulate his mission.

The journey through the season of Epiphany tells the story of Jesus three years of ministry. Paul in the second reading from the Acts of the Apostles wants to be sure that Christians are aware of the nature of that mission and calling. He tells us that it is not "we" will save the world, nor save individuals, or cure the sick or do any one of the things that bring about the Kingdom Jesus promised.

Rather Paul is at pains to point out that we are recipients of a special kind of grace. It is the grace that Hess has won for us. It is the grace of the Holy Spirit. He is saying that we become involved in salvation and ministry only when the Holy Spirit dwells within us. It is the power of the spirit that brings us to the point where we are capable of being virtuous towards others; through the spirit we forgive, through the spirit we are touched by kindness and we touch others in turn; through the spirit we make the sacrifices that make a difference in people's lives.

Paul wants us to realize that that is the way the Body of Christ works. He doesn't call the Christians together to participate in Eucharist or the breaking of bread for any other reason than that he knows that when they gather, there is the holy spirit in their midst. It is then that Christ's church can be an effect force for good.

Without grace and the Holy Spirit we are lost. We can never unlock the forgiveness that Christ has won for us. Without grace we become more insular, so convinced of our own sense of right and destined to live lonely inner lives devoid of true love or even compassion.

C. S. Lewis, the great Anglican writer speaks of this in many of his books including "That hideous strength" and "Mere Christianity." He tells us that it is not God who brings hell into our lives; it is "we" ourselves who imprison, cut ourselves off and become cast away from God, because we refuse to accept the grace Christ has won for us. It is "we" who place ourselves in chains, it is we who speak in an incomprehensible language and confine our eternity to aloneness.

We won't accept grace because we prefer to wallow in our own selfishness; or our pride refuses to allow us to see that we need forgiveness. Self sufficient we have swallowed the lie that we our totally the masters our own destiny.

Is it any wonder that the great scholar St. Ambrose of Milan said that all salvation begins with humility and all humility begins with prayer? It is the surest temperature gauge for the state of our souls: "Do we pray? And if we do not what on earth, heaven or hell is stopping us. Do we truly believe we can go through life without Christ's saving grace or his holy spirit?"

When asked: "How he could be so hypocritical as to go to church and call himself a Christian, the novelist Evelyn Waugh replied: "If you think me bad now. I can assure you without my Christianity, I would be so much worse."

Maybe it works for some of us, in the precise same way: “Without Christ grace and the Holy Spirit in our lives how would anyone put up with us? Self opinioned, mean, selfish, bad tempered, moody, greedy, self absorbed. St Paul asks the question: “Who can save us from the sea of woe and sinfulness?”