

Sermon for 10 January 2021

It is Wednesday morning as I continue the preparation that I began at the weekend. I am currently bathed in sunshine sitting and looking out on to Lake Taupo. There are boats on the Lake and parasailing occurring. To my left are four large motor homes parked as I am. To my right three young men are cooking sausages on a small portable barbeque. Probably it is breakfast for them at 10.30am. This is indeed my happy place!

I continued to reflect on the readings for today. Today is all about new beginnings. In Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth. All was dark and God said “let there be light.” God used the light to separate day from night. God is creating order out of chaos, unformed into formed. In Mark we read of Jesus baptism which marked the beginning of his ministry. All creation in the moment of Jesus’ baptism is altered. Out of that rupture comes the Holy Spirit in a form that is described as a dove. That dove **does not come upon** Jesus. He is **infused** with the Spirit from God. A new reality has come into the world, transforming all things including the seen (the heavens and a dove) and the unseen (a voice). In Acts those disciples are introduced to the Holy Spirit. They had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. Upon being baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus, the Holy Spirit came on them.

The baptism of Christ and the beginning of His ministry and our beginning in this year of 2021.

I think about how the events of 2020 might have changed us, both as individuals and as a faith community. I remember little about my baptism as a child but of course it is not about that one day but about an entire lifetime and how I and we live out our lives as followers of Christ in this modern and often challenging world.

Thinking back to March 2020, when we suddenly and unexpectedly went in to COVID 19 level four lock-down. Did we go in to that time seeing opportunity or with fear and anxiety? There was little time to prepare. Think back to what those weeks in lock-down were like. Better or worse than we imagined.

Back to our baptism, the beginning of the development of our relationship with Christ; God as our guide and the Holy Spirit as part of our journey through the inevitable triumphs and tragedies, the highs and lows, curiosity and challenge.

I often wonder what those without faith draw on, particularly in stressful and uncertain times. New Zealand is a relatively small and somewhat isolated country. In these COVID 19 times we now see those features as advantages. Over recent months we have heard much about not being complacent. As a country we cannot be complacent about the high rates of mental un-wellness, of suicides. These rates are nothing to be proud of. Rates of alcoholism, abuse and violence, loneliness, stress and anxiety are becoming much more common. The COVID situation has increased many, if not all, of these rates. Rates we cannot be complacent about or proud of in our nation.

Did you emerge from COVID level four lock-down better or worse than you imagined at the beginning? New beginnings perhaps.

In the reading from Genesis chapter 1, we read of the earth as formless and empty with darkness over the surface of the deep. God said, "let there be light" and he separated light from the darkness. Light equalled day, and dark equalled the night.

In the reading from the book of Acts chapter 19 those disciples had been baptised by John, a baptism of repentance. When asked if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed, they replied "we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." They were told to believe in Jesus, the one coming after John. They were baptised in the name of Jesus and the Holy Spirit came on them. There is a difference between coming upon and being within.

In the gospel of Mark chapter 1, John's baptising was one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He baptised in the Jordan river. Jesus was baptised by John, when He came up out of the water the heavens were torn wide open and the Holy Spirit came down like a dove. John baptised with water, Jesus baptised with the Holy Spirit.

John calls the people to faith through repentance and baptism. Out of the wilderness came the voice that knew faith as a gift essential to life. Alexander Schmemmann

deepens our understanding of the relationship between sacrament and faith in this way:

The essential question about faith in its relationship to the sacrament is: *what* faith, and even more precisely, *whose* faith? And the equally essential answer to this question is: *it is Christ's faith* given to us, becoming our faith and our desire...

Faith, Schmemmann continues, is either a *response* to God's call or "the very *reality* of that to which the call summons." Faith, in other words, is what baptism imparts *to* us. Through the Holy Spirit, in baptism we are given the faith *of* Jesus. "The presence in this world of Christ's faith is the Church."² Baptism opens our hearts and our minds to becoming instruments that bring unity and peace to our neighbours.

We might not have felt the heavens torn wide open at the time when we were baptised but in our lifetime we have had such 'God' moments when the Holy Spirit has touched, guided and supported us. Perhaps during the Level 4 lock-down. It is in the challenging times, times of uncertainty and upheaval as we journey with the Holy Spirit that we are enriched and our relationship with God in Jesus blossoms and grows, often significantly. It may be that something extraordinary comes out of something that appears quite 'ordinary' as well.

Baptism is lifelong, Jesus is our constant companion, we find strength with the Holy Spirit. We are part of a faith community where we give and receive love and reassurance.

As I look out across the lake and to the mountain I appreciate the beauty of the surroundings in this very spiritual and peaceful place. I have a renewed awareness of the need to take time for self and appreciate my surroundings. During lock-down I worked from home, only during my usual working hours though. At other times, evenings and weekends, I took a daily walk, I focused on prayer and Bible reading several times a day, made use of the online resources and live stream services, quiet time with God and I connected with members of our church community. Imagine that lock-down looked similar for a number of you.

I wrote a number of articles for the church website about keeping well during lock-down. Wellness is physical, mental, social and spiritual in balance.

Baptism prepares us for where we draw our strength from, how we assist others with theirs. Our faith community provides us with strong role models and leaders in living out their faith. St Peters has had and still has a number of such people. Think about who they are for you and how they have influenced your developing relationship with God.

Christ, in his baptism and the life he led, shows us the way in today's world. He reached out to those on the margins of society, those simply passed by, by others. In these COVID 19 times more people than ever are struggling on a daily basis, situation exacerbated by all kinds of loss – loss of job, loss of income, loss of health, loved ones who died alone during lock-down, times of uncertainty and lack of a clear path ahead for some time yet. Even some of those who considered they had a firm life plan, with certain employment were unsettled in the COVID situation

In a world where people seek control and the need to control their own destiny we have all been reminded that there are things that lie outside of our control, even today. Natural disasters also remind us of this on a regular basis.

We do not and cannot know what lies ahead in 2021. We can be sure in our baptism and in our faith in God whatever happens. The baptism of Christ and our own baptism reminds us of this. We have certainty in this and this is our focus in the world.

New Year's Resolutions get set and often quickly broken. Resolutions to save more, eat more healthily, to exercise effectively and the like. In our baptism we set about growing our relationship with Christ, connecting with our faith community, reaching out to those in need, appreciating what we have, may be even using our time wisely. These are achievable in the short and long term. **God is with us. Christ's baptism is for everyone. The Holy Spirit is our guide. The heavens are torn wide open and the Holy Spirit descends and is within us, out and inward, every day as we journey with Christ.**

It is not coincidence that in the gospel of Mark chapter one the baptism of Christ is followed by the 40 days in the wilderness being tempted. The Spirit made Jesus go in to the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. Wild animals are there but the angels

helped him. We all have our own kind of wilderness where we too are tempted in today's, often complicated and complex world, with its stresses and challenges.

In our baptism it is *it is Christ's faith* given to us, becoming our faith and our desire...

Faith is what baptism imparts *to us*. Through the Holy Spirit, in baptism we are given the *faith of Jesus*. "The presence in this world of Christ's faith is the Church."² Baptism opens our hearts and our minds to becoming instruments that bring unity and peace to our neighbours and those in need. Let us face 2021 with faith and hope in Jesus Christ.

AMEN

Faye Davenport