

21 February 2021

Genesis 9:8-17
1 Peter 3:18-22
Mark 1:9-15

There have been two occasions in my life when I have nearly drowned. The first was during a family holiday to the beach. I don't remember it, but my parents have recounted the story. I was perhaps about two or three years of age. My twin brother and I were playing in the shallows. Dad was sitting on the sand, reading the newspaper. A little wave ran up the beach. Apparently I jumped up and down with excitement as the wave ran up against my feet; fell over, and was then face-down and motionless in about two inches of water.

Dad didn't even pause to put down his newspaper, running to drag me safely to my feet, coughing, spluttering, and then crying.

The second incident occurred when I was about fifteen. Dad is a keen equestrian, and at that time had built a swimming pool for his horses. (That may sound odd, but swimming is actually very good exercise for horses.) For horses to swim the pool needs to be deep. This pool was, I guess, about three metres deep, a major excavation, filled with murky water laden with clay sediment and a little horse dung. The horses would enter the pool down a ramp, led by their attendant. The attendant would walk around the outside bank of the circular pool, leading the swimming horse. A plank ran over the ramp so that the attendant could complete circuits of the pool. On some occasions I would be one of those attendants. One day, Dad warned me that the particular horse in my charge was prone to trying to escape, ducking under the plank. The trick, said Dad, was to give a good hard flick on the rope attached to its halter as a discouragement. The first few circuits of the pool were fine. But eventually, sure enough, the horse tried it on, turning to swim under the plank to gain the exit ramp. I gave a huge flick with the rope ... and unfortunately, followed through with my whole body. Splash! There I was sinking fast, fully clothed right down to my gumboots. As I sank I saw, despite the murky water, a horse turd drift past, and, more alarmingly, one of the horse's mighty hooves swinging past my face as it continued vigorously swimming. Thankfully I managed to struggle upwards, and

Dad was able to grab me before I sank again. I was hauled from the pool, sans one of my gumboots (eventually found years later when the pool was drained).

The only thing I really recall about the first full immersion baptism I ever conducted was the look on seventeen-year-old Ben's face as I lowered him into the water and the water flooded over his face. It was a look of wide-eyed panic. It was just an instant, but it was very vivid. In his mind he absolutely knew what was really going on, but something deep and instinctive within him nevertheless recognised this immersion as carrying the risk of drowning.

Baptism is a sacrament and symbol of dying and rising.

Baptism is a multi-faceted sacrament, with several layers of meaning and symbolism. One of these layers is death, burial, and rising again: we go down into a watery grave, and are drawn back out again into new life.

In baptism we become participants in the dying and rising of Christ. We are counted dead to sin: the old life is behind us. This is our spiritual death. It is in thinking about this dying, this drowning, that brought the memory of my near-drownings to mind; and also especially brought Ben's baptism back to me so vividly: that shock in his eyes as the water closed over his mouth and nostrils – he really looked for a split-second like he thought he was going to drown.

Baptism is a participation in the dying of Christ. It is also participation in his rising again. We receive the benefits of Jesus' risen life, as we start to live as free human beings, freed from the bondage of sin. This is our spiritual rising.

Our bodily death will, at the end of the age, be followed by our bodily rising again. It is at this time that all the fullness of the promise represented in baptism will be made real.

I have focussed so far on *our* baptism, and *our* entering into the life of Christ. But our gospel passage begins with the baptism of Jesus. Why was Jesus baptised?

John the Baptist, we are told by Luke and Matthew, offered a baptism of *repentance for the forgiveness of sins*. So why did Jesus – he who did not sin – submit himself to baptism?

Donald English, an English minister, wrote:

We may only guess what it all meant to Jesus, but there is great sense in the suggestion that he dedicates himself to obey God's will through an event which symbolises what the whole ministry will involve – making it possible for sinners to repent in order to find forgiveness and new life from God. In baptism he shares the circumstances in which people become aware of their needs, precisely in order to meet those needs. He was to do that again and again in his ministry, and supremely in his death and resurrection.¹

Jesus underwent John's baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. Jesus shares our humanity; he goes before us; there is nothing he asks of us that he has not willingly undergone.

In baptism we put to death the old self, with its fallen human nature. There is something deeply wrong with humankind. Our human propensity to sin is brought into focus in the gospels by what happened after Jesus was baptised: he was sent by the Spirit into the wilderness, where he was tempted by Satan.

In Mark's gospel – the gospel we focus on this year – the account is extremely brief: just two sentences. If we look at Matthew's or Luke's fuller accounts we see that Jesus was tested in terms of how he would accomplish his work.² Three possible paths, false but potentially attractive paths, were presented to him. But in each case, Jesus chose a different way:

- He chose a path of bread breaking and sharing life with others instead of instant personal gratification.
- He chose a path of vulnerability and intimacy instead of immunity.
- He chose a path of solidarity with the oppressed instead of grasping power for his own ends.

¹ English, page 39.

² This section adapted from "Ashes II" in Moxon, *Wings of the Morning*, pp.11-13.

Jesus was at war with the principalities and powers, and defeated them; as Peter says, “Jesus is at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers *in submission to him*”. He did this through the cross, through his suffering and death. He did this through the path of suffering, suffering with human kind, sharing life with others, being vulnerable, being in solidarity with the oppressed.

We are called to be united with him in this kind of suffering.

The gospel records that Jesus was *sent* into the wilderness. This reminds me that in fact Jesus was always sent: sent to earth in the first place – as for example, we read in John 3:16 “God so loved the world, that he sent his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Jesus was sent for a purpose: Jesus was sent to be the God-supplied faithful covenant partner which humankind could never be; sent to die bearing the full weight of the consequences of human sin, rebellion, and idolatry; sent to model the ways of God; sent to call human beings back to God. It was summed up in Jesus’ preaching, “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the good news.”

It is easy for us to get this a little around the wrong way, and to think that to repent is primarily about changing how we behave, our actions, and that to believe is primarily about changing how we think. But actually, to repent is to change our mind, to change how we think. And to believe is to act out of complete trust and obedience to the one in whom we believe: a genuine belief will be demonstrated by action. To say “I believe that Fletchers is rock solid” is only so many words until I actually go and buy the shares. To say “I believe that that chair will hold my weight” is meaningless unless I’m prepared to sit in it.

Jesus called us to repent and believe the good news. The first thing we have to do is change how we think. And a key part of that is changing how we think of our own identity. We have to appreciate who we are in God.

As Jesus came up out of the waters of the Jordan, heaven was opened and a voice was heard, saying ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’

I didn't always have a good relationship with my father. We are very different people, with different personalities and interests. I was never going to be a sportsman like he was; I was never going to be a farmer. When I helped on the farm, I sometimes didn't listen carefully enough to instructions, and made silly mistakes. I resented the intrusion of farm-work into time for my preferred pursuits. I feared Dad's anger. Through those teen years I often felt that I disappointed him; I questioned his love for me.

(Perhaps it is no surprise then that when I go to the movies it is more often than not scenes of father-son reconciliation that have me tearing up.)

Even though we are still very different, in recent years Dad's expressions of affirmation for my adult self have meant a great deal.

'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

And if I ever doubted Dad's love, I should have recalled those times when he reached into the waters and plucked me out of death.

We all need to hear who we are in God. Three things can help in this:

- First, through daily prayer and reflection on the scriptures, in which open ourselves to hear the gently corrective voice of God about who we are in him.
- Second, through affirming the truth of God's love for us – saying to ourselves daily, and saying it to ourselves especially when we find ourselves doubting our self worth.
- Thirdly, this is something we can do for others. We can tell others that they are beloved children of God; and when we affirm others for the goodness we see in them, we are also helping them apprehend the truth that they are beloved of God.

We need to hear who we are in God. We all need to hear his words 'You are my son, my daughter, whom I love.' That is the beginning of repentance. The whole of humankind needs to hear God's words of love, the love that means that God has placed his rainbow in the sky and has promised that never again will he destroy what he made. We need to remember that that promise is made without condition: it does not depend on how we humans behave. It is the Accuser's, Satan's, voice that

attacks us in the wildernesses of life, causing us to doubt God's purpose and love for us.

Repent: hear who you are in God, which has nothing to do with how good or bad you are and everything to do with God's loving purpose for the world.

Repent; repent and *believe*. Secure in God's love, place your trust in him; live your life in his purpose for you, for humankind.

And as we think about how we are to live and why we live, we must recognise that like Jesus, we are a sent people. The reason Jesus was sent into the world still holds, and is the purpose we are called to be his disciples. In John 20 we read that after his resurrection,

... when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ...

'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.' And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.'

We are a sent people, sent into the world to continue the reconciling work for which Jesus was sent by God the Father.

And remember, the kingdom of God is near. In Jesus, God was beginning his reign of justice and love over all of creation. In the resurrection of Jesus, we saw a foretaste of part of what that means – that sin and death are conquered.

The good news is about Jesus, the King, coming to his people *in the midst of the wilderness*. The good news is that in and through Jesus, God the Father reaches into the mucky waters of our lives and rescues us. And that should remind us that part of where we need to repent and believe the good news is to recognise that the good news is for *all* people, and our task is to proclaim and embody that good news into the very wilderness, into the chaotic murky waters, of our own generation.

Sources:

- + Justin Duckworth and Rev. Chelsea Kirby, video sermon for Lent 1 2021, <https://vimeo.com/anglicanmovement/download/513175564/2775c1eed4>
- + Eleanor Sanderson, video sermon for Lent 1 - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2kTlZj6H1LE&feature=youtu.be>
- Donald English, *The Message of Mark*, IVP BST
- David Moxon, *Wings of the Morning*
- Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays, Year B*
- Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, "Beloved child of God", <https://www.workingpreacher.org/dear-working-preacher/beloved-child-of-god>