

The Cathedral Church of the Redeemer
The Baptism of the Lord, year 'B'
8 January 2012
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In the gospel for this morning, Jesus goes down into the muddy waters of the Jordan and as he comes up, we're told that he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him. He hears a voice call to him from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Apparently no one else heard or saw anything. This was a subjective, personal experience for Jesus. And it proved to be a definitive one. Mark uses an image of violence when says the heavens were torn apart, as if to say that at this moment of revelation and self-awareness, Jesus' life was torn in two; what had happened before was shorn away, left behind. The future, with all of its uncertainty, adventure, promise – and danger – was opening up in a wholly new way, such that life would never be the same again. He had a new vision of life, not only of his own life, but of every human life, and at the moment of this vision the Spirit of God seized hold of him and took possession of him, giving him strength and energy to begin anew.

So this gospel speaks to us of new vision, new life and new beginning. It says that every life that amounts to anything begins with a vision. The vision may not come until a person is seventy years old; in that case life begins at seventy. But in order to have a vision, we must be open to new possibilities and be willing to let go of the past. Most of us spend quite a lot of our time rummaging around in our past, reviewing our failures and recalling how the world has mistreated us. If our lives are rooted in the past, coloured by the past and controlled by the past, our vision will be only that of hindsight, never foresight. For most of us, our lives are like a palimpsest: an overwritten manuscript in which the mistakes and failures of the past continually bleed into, and spoil the present, making them an ever-present, albeit shadowy, reality.

Our gospel speaks to us of new life. Most of us are so busy with the ordinary work of living that we never really learn how to live. We're bogged down by routines of work and family, and the daily grind has worn us down and worn us out. We're so exhausted by the rat race and the winner-takes-all mentality, and what's worse, we're so caught up in these things, that our zest for life is gone. Our so-called "down time," is increasingly taking the form of either mindless diversions, like endless hours in front of a television, or vicarious living through others by means of social media, so much so that we've developed a kind of Stockholm syndrome towards these things. They have long held us in their thrall and, despite the fact we are captive to them, we have begun to believe that life without them is impossible.

Our gospel speaks to us of new beginnings. But how do we begin again? We have lost the way back, or at least it has been so choked with the detritus of the past that

we have convinced ourselves there is no way to cut our way through. How many times have we said to ourselves, "I am who I am, there's no point trying to change now?" We take a stubborn sort of satisfaction in "staying the course" even if we know we're heading for destruction, since we've been taught to believe that to retreat, to turn back and to reconsider is to admit failure. We're afraid of looking weak and indecisive, of being accused of never being able to stay committed to our chosen path, our chosen vocation and have developed a perverse sense of pride that, though everyone else may throw in the towel and turn back, we shall forge on ahead – even if it means we destroy ourselves in the process.

New vision, new life, new beginning – or to put it more succinctly: before and after. Whoever Jesus was, and what his plans for life were before he decided to be baptised, we can't say. No one knows. I imagine he was quietly going about life as the rest of us do, without much to look forward to, perhaps even without much sense of purpose, until one day the holy longing, that yearning for something more that abides deep within each of us, grew so strong that he said farewell to his past, stepped away from the mind-numbing drudgery of the present and decided to begin anew. He turned the page of his life and in so doing discovered that God had a divine purpose for him.

All of this is possible for us too, providing that we are willing to go down into the muddy waters of the Jordan and let those waters wash the dust of the past from our eyes, sluice off the chains of our present limitations and rinse away our stubborn pride. The Jordan is the dividing line between "before" and "after", that place we cross over when we answer the holy longing, when we decide that the pain of holding on to the past is greater than letting it go, that the comfort of our present lives is actually torture, that our refusal to begin again means nothing less than self-destruction. If we are willing to go down into the Jordan, if we are willing to die to the old, to break free of our present limitations and tear off the over-written page of our life, we will come out on the other shore able to see the vision of God's glorious calling breaking upon us.

Jesus heard the voice saying, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." It spoke words from the Second Psalm, which was used at the coronation of a king. It was saying, "You are the one to show my people my way, you are the one to reveal my love to them, you are the one I have chosen."

Likewise the voice of God speaks to those who are willing to do what Jesus said. It says to you and to me, "*You* are my beloved." The sound of the voice is our epiphany, our new vision and glorious realization that we are so much more than we thought. We aren't victims of our past, or prisoners of the impersonal present. We are children of God, named by him, and called by him, to begin again, to start really living and loving and giving. The voice of God calls out in answer to our holy longing and when we look up and see our life torn in two, we see that what lies before us is the fresh and glorious opportunity of new life which is called into the service of God and the world. Washed clean, and freed by the waters, we see the dawn breaking

with the first rays of light piercing the darkness, we feel new and whole, and that our life has meaning. Though we have known the darkness of despair and doubt, and have stood on the void of nothingness, we are finally, at last, alive. And Christ is with us, refreshing, comforting, urging us always forward with eager and joyful expectation of the time when we will share with him the crown of undying life.

Open our eyes, good Lord, to see a new vision breaking upon us. Free us from the chains of our present life. Enable us not to be afraid of beginning again. Give us courage to step down into the waters and die so that we may truly live, now and forever. Amen.