

Baptism of Christ Mark 1:4-11

It rained on Tuesday. We had Storm Eleanor to thank for that. It rained so hard, and the wind blew so strongly, that they closed the Thames Flood Barrier, and the Humber Bridge. The Environment Agency issued flood warnings for the Avon between Pill and Shirehampton and for Portishead. They do a good job the Environment Agency; they should be commended. They did fail, however, to issue the flood warnings I needed to hear, the one for my spare bedroom, or the second one, for my study, and the crucial storm warning, for my own bedroom. I had running water in rooms that do not even have taps.

So, Tuesday night was a sharp and unwelcome reminder that water is not tame. Rain is fine when it is beating on your windows and you are toasting your toes by the fire. It is not fine when it is pouring in through the light fitting. If you think of water as something that gets delivered in bottles by Sainsbury's, or you imagine water in your bath, still and topped with scented suds... well, you may be missing something and you are going to struggle with our gospel reading today. You see, the story, we heard this morning, the story of Christ's baptism takes some very familiar concepts, water amongst them, and it turns them inside out.

It was Mark's gospel we heard this morning, and it needs some unpacking. It tells you one thing, but hints at another. Mark wants you to stumble; wants you to notice the difficulty. This morning we need a bible study.

Mark's gospel, it starts oddly. Years ago, I completely wrecked our understanding of the UK series of *House of Cards* by putting on the DVDs in the wrong order. Mark's gospel has the same feel. It starts in the middle, there is no Christmas, just John the Baptist suddenly bellowing out prophecy in the wilderness. It begins before you are sitting comfortably. You are off balance and that is how Mark wants you, This is unpredictable, dislocating, urgent.

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness

What, you should ask, is a baptizer doing in the wilderness? Baptizers need water. More seriously, the wilderness is the place Israel left behind when Moses died. John is asking them to come out of the cities God gave them and walk backwards into the story they thought was over. And he is an awkward figure this John. His father is a temple priest; that means he should become a temple priest himself. He has left *that* behind. He is also a radical. His message is unsettling; they think he is dangerous. The king will kill him very soon.

He is preaching baptism. That too is tricky. Jews are never baptized, they are Jews by *birth*. It is as if I have asked Mrs Hoyle to sit GCSE Home Economics, it is offensive. This is telling the Jews that they lack religion, their faith will not save. He is preaching repentance; radical, repentance. Repentance is not the same thing as feeling a bit shifty because you were rude to the cat, or sorry you had the last of the mince pies for breakfast. Repentance is the admission that you were wrong, looking in the wrong place, satisfied with the wrong answers. Not this, but *that*, a change of heart, a different way of doing things.

They lapped that message up. The crowds came. Bizarrely, they came, back to the wilderness, telling John and one another they had been wrong all this time. They came to John who was

dressed as Elijah used to dress. Elijah, the one who was supposed to return at the end of days; the herald of the Lord. They came looking for a new beginning.

And then Mark offers us a really strange phrase

He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me"

John is describing Christ. He says, Christ will be more *powerful*, 'stronger' might be a better translation - *o`ivscuro, tero, j*. Not *holier*, notice, not *wiser*, not even *greater*. Christ will be *stronger*. He will *need* to be stronger. That is a really interesting idea. We rather assume that religious people are sometimes a bit weird, fanatical even, or we think they are polite, prone to saying 'please' and 'thank you' and likely to express profound emotion by singing a hymn. Mark thinks the defining characteristic of Christ, (and Christ is the person who shows us how to be human) is that Christ is *strong*. Christ will need that strength. He will fight evil, face prejudice, and endure agony. His strength will be generous, forgiving, hopeful, and persistent. If you think strength is hostile, angry and comes loaded with weapons, Christ will not seem strong. He will be resilient. He will be, above all things, himself. And that is what he invites us to be – strong.

This is not what anyone expects. Mark has told us to expect something. He began with prophecy; Prepare the way of the Lord he said. We were told to look for something. This is what we see: *Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee*. It is all wrong. Everyone knew that nothing good comes from Galilee.

Let's just remind ourselves... not only are we in the wilderness where we are not supposed to be, asking for a baptism we should not need... we have gone to see, John, and now John turns tells us he is not the person we hoped he would be. When the right man does arrive he is firstly anonymous in the crowd, and then we discover, he comes from exactly the wrong place. He comes from Galilee, he is foreign, wrong, he is not *religious*.

And then, at last, we come to the water. John is baptizing with water. Don't think of water in a font, this is the kind of water that comes through the ceiling. Jews think that, before creation, there was just water and it was terrifying.

the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,
Genesis 1:2

Jews think water is the opposite of creation. It is chaotic and meaningless. It is also destructive. Moses got through the sea and then watched it destroy Pharaoh's army.

You blew with your wind, the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters. Exodus 15:8-10

That story, the story of Jonah and the whale, and the story of Paul's journeys, all depend on the special fear that is to be felt on the sea. When prophets describe a terrifying army they compare it to the roaring of the sea. So, when *Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee* to be baptized with water, when he goes down into the Jordan it looks a bit like dying. It also looks a bit like a new creation, a challenge to the old chaos.

There is more. There are the heavens torn open; there is that voice, *You are my Son, the Beloved*. By now, though, I think you may have heard the message of Mark. It is unsettling; it is not what we expect.

In the lectionary, the cycle of readings we follow through the year, this Sunday is *The Baptism of Christ*. We think we know about Baptism, it is a baby (possibly in lace) an uncle in a tight fitting suit, proud parents, and brothers hoping there will be plenty to drink later. Baptism is predictable and baptism is a routine. That is a set of associations that sets us off in the wrong direction. Christ, who turns out not to be what we expected at all, goes out into the wilderness and accepts a baptism he does not need. He is baptized into repentance. That, of course, is all wrong too. Christ is sinless. There is nothing for him to repent. He repents because not because he has been wrong, he repents because we are all of us wrong; all looking, in the wrong place, for the wrong answers. Christ repents; he renounces the culture he lives in. Christ turns away from the way we do things round here. That, of course, is precisely why he has to be strong. He will need the strength to resist doing things the way we always do them, and making the judgements we always make. He will need the strength to hope for something more.

If you want to know what Christian commitment means, what is expected of us, that is it. It is very simple. Christians hope for something more. It does not always have to be the same; the 'way we do things here' is not the creed. Christian vocation is very simple to understand; it is less easy to live that vocation. It requires strength. Christ's 'repentance', the course he took from his baptism, put him at odds with all the assumptions made by religion and power. This was a vocation that ended on the cross. He had that strength. He had the strength to live a fully human life in which hope was never extinguished. He resisted all the tired compromises that get the rest of us by.

Christian vocation is a call to live life fully. It is a lot easier to accept that you will never live in that hope. It is a lot easier to settle for less. We get by if we settle for less. I had ten minutes with the newspapers this morning and they pretty well demanded I settle for less. It is not that the news is bad or gloomy. It is bad and gloomy, but there is a more significant problem. The news is bizarre, governments struggle to govern, plans are frustrated, policies are not delivered. There is no narrative any more, there is no sense that one thing follows another and the only commentary is twitter. We settle for less.

Mark insists that there is a narrative, still. Jesus comes to the Jordan and there is hope in the wilderness. Jesus comes to the Jordan and meaning rises out of the waters of chaos. There is repentance there will be redemption. You need resilience to go on believing that, you need strength to assert it, but that is the vocation of the baptized.