

Lectionary Readings for the First Sunday of Epiphany

The Baptism of Christ

Acts 19: 1-7

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the interior regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?” They replied, “No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.” Then he said, “Into what then were you baptized?” They answered, “Into John’s baptism.” Paul said, “John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.” On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1: 4-11

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.”

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

Sermon for The Baptism of Christ

Baptism, repentance, forgiveness.
Three big words for one small sermon, but I don't see how you can speak of one
without speaking of the others.

And this is their very particular order:
forgiveness, *then* repentance, *then* baptism.

Because if you get the order right, then I think you are able to see more clearly
what each is about: *forgiveness, repentance, baptism.*

We may have gotten it into our heads that if you don't repent, you cannot be forgiven.
God's mercy is conditional upon our repentance.
That's the formula: if you repent, then God will forgive you.

But I think that this is the wrong order, the wrong way round.

Growing up as a Baptist in Texas, I remember my father, with us in the car,
driving past a man, on occasion, arms flailing,
who would be trying to shout words at the passers-by,
and the knot of people who congregated around him—words on this theme:
Repent—the time is now—the Bible says, repent! or your soul will be damned to hell.
So repent, and be saved.

In my church on a Sunday, the sermons may have been long,
but they didn't use words like *hell* and *damnation*.
So that theological message was not reinforced,
but it did make a strong childhood impression, that encounter!

It hasn't been helpful that this stereotype, the wild-eyed evangelical preacher
brandishing a Bible, is most likely what we see in our mind when we hear the word,
repent. If we hear it at all. I wonder when you have last overheard the word *repent*
as you made your way down the sidewalk or in and out of the shops!

But the point I want to make is that even John the Baptist wasn't baptising people
in order to make this kind of statement.

He wasn't trying to tell people that if they didn't repent they would go to hell.

Rather, the reverse:

it was because the Kingdom of forgiveness was already at hand
that John and Jesus *therefore* summoned everyone to repentance.

The great theologian John Calvin, among others, pondered this.

Paul said this in the Letter to the Romans:

Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (2:4)

There is the famous episode just a bit farther on in Mark's Gospel where Jesus himself, when the faithful friends lower the paralytic down from the roof because they can't get through the crowd, Jesus sees the man who is paralyzed and says, *Son, your sins are forgiven. Not, I can and will heal you—get up and walk!* Jesus is more interested in how the man will live out this restoration of health and well-being—if forgiveness will *result in* a changed life of true repentance.

John's Gospel has this characteristic scene: when the scribes and the Pharisees bring before Jesus a woman taken in the act of adultery, expecting him to condemn her, Jesus instead says, *Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.* When they have all drifted away and the two are left standing in silence, Jesus then says to her: *Neither do I condemn you. Go your way and sin no more.* Having already been forgiven, Jesus sets her free to live a life of repentance.

And then there are Jesus's words of forgiveness from the cross,
setting the whole world free.

So this is the great reversal:
forgiveness comes *before* repentance,
making repentance—true repentance—
a change of life, possible.

Baptism then follows, the last in this sequence.
Forgiveness, repentance, baptism.

John's baptism of repentance was preparatory,
but already a sign that the Kingdom of God was breaking in.
When Jesus came to be baptised by John, the Kingdom became present, actualized.
God's own Spirit descended upon him,
identifying him, sealing him, with favor and blessing.

To be baptized in Jesus's baptism, in the name of the Lord Jesus, is everything.
It is all we need.

The symbol of baptism is the sign of our commitment
to the God *who has already forgiven us.*
We are forgiven, redeemed, loved, included in the family of faith that stretches out
beyond the horizon, beyond what we will ever be able to see.

Baptism remains, for Christians, the one great symbol of belonging—that's it.

We declare publicly that
we want to graft ourselves into the body of Christ,
we want to enlarge the small family we happen to be born into,
we embrace this new kind of life that opens out to us.

There is not a two-tier system.
The role of the Holy Spirit in relation to baptism is not to be
a sort of super-authenticating force from above,
distinguishing more authentic Christians from all the rest.

The Holy Spirit is, rather, a reality that infuses forgiveness into our very lives—
and it can be felt and experienced in many ways.

In Luke's Gospel John the baptizer does shout words of damnation
to those who are thronging to the river:
*You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?
Bear fruits worthy of repentance.*

This is what comes next in the sequence of forgiveness, repentance, and baptism.
It is the bearing of fruit in the lives we are given to lead.
The Christian faith is an active faith,
realising the power and grace and goodness of God in the lives we lead every day.
We have been sealed with God's own Holy Spirit,
inspired and enabled to do every good work.

Re-read the beautiful words of the Baptismal service in the Book of Common Prayer
and the Book of Common Worship, both. They are worth reminding ourselves of.

I close with this Collect from the service of Baptism:

*Heavenly Father,
by the power of your Holy Spirit
you give your faithful people new life in the water of baptism.
Guide and strengthen us by the same Spirit,
that we who are born again may serve you in faith and love,
and grow into the full stature of your Son, Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit
now and for ever.*

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