

Sunday 14th January 2024, Baptism of Jesus (transferred), Eucharist

Mark 1:4-11

Father Tim Carroll

This time last year if you asked most people in the U.K where Fenny Compton, Warwickshire, population 800, was located, they would probably struggle to locate it. Although now the village hall has visitors and selfie takers outside. This small village is the location which Alan Bates organised a meeting for ex postmasters and mistresses who had been victims of the accounting system bug which was used to wrongly accused this group as false accounting and theft. It has been headline news all week as one of the most widespread miscarriages of Justice in British history, which lead to deaths, prison sentences and bankruptcy. The struggle for justice was long, arduous, relentless and costly. The struggle for ordinary working people to stand up to large cooperation's wasn't easy and only seemed possible when they gathered in a sleepy village in Warwickshire to form Justice for Sub-postmasters Alliance campaign group.

In Mark's Gospel something is happening in unexpected obscure places. Jesus makes an entrance that could be described anticlimactic. John has been announcing a powerful one who is coming after him. Preparing the way for the Messiah. You might be expecting something more than Jesus simply appearing as one in an anonymous crowd. Mark adds that he comes from 'Nazareth in Galilee' – we would expect this greater than John hero to be better credentialed, although other Gospels do stress Jesus' genealogy, Mark stresses his obscure origins, 'from Nazareth' which is tantamount to introducing him as 'Jesus from nowhereville'. Throughout this Gospel Mark reminds readers of Jesus' humble Nazareth roots. There is no historical sources of anything significant happening in this town. Galilee on the other hand was notorious, it would have been regarded with contempt and suspicion. Yet it is upon this person of doubtful social status from a remote location, who emerges from the anonymous crowd in the wilderness who we hear is the beloved son.

When he emerges from the waters of baptism, the heavens break open and a voice is recorded speaking of his election. Could this Nazarene villager be the fulfilment of ancient longing? When Jesus is baptised and this divine voice confirms this longing when it is recorded "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased. There is actually no indication that any of the bystanders at the Jordan hear anything. We are given some privileged information.

As we gather together this morning for the Baptism of Zachary, we may not hear any privy to any divine voices. But it does make you wonder what God is saying to him and his family today. I imagine you are loved, and you are welcomed are part of it.

When we come to the end of our passage, after we hear these magnificent words over Jesus of Nazareth, we are given another anticlimactic scene where he simply retreats deeper into the wilderness. Maybe you wonder why Jesus was baptised – did Jesus need to repent like

those who came to the waters of Galilee. K Burridge discusses the obligation of Jesus' baptism being a symbolic act of repentance – an end to participation with unjust structures and values of society. He symbolically shows his allegiance to the new creation with the renunciation of the old way of doing things. Through baptism Jesus' mission will be to challenge the oppressive structures. As Baptised Christians we are also to not participate in upholding the unjust values that are found in the structures in our society. Which are so painfully highlighted in the post office scandal we hear of the news. It's a reminder to those in all areas of life, especially the church, to not cover up wrong doing.

As we have heard Jesus has been driven even further into the wilderness. The wilderness in the bible is treated with ambivalence, it can be a place of transition for Israel as they journey from the liberation of Egypt to the promise of Canaan. It is a testing environment, a place of punishment but also of revelation. There is hunger, thirst, confusion, and bewilderment but a place in the Bible where Israel claims their identity as the chosen people of God. It is a powerful symbol in the Bible and can be a way to metaphorically think about our experiences of wilderness today. You may feel you are in a wilderness at the moment. Maybe all the talk of new beginnings, new years resolutions, New Year New Me quickly evaporate and you feel a little lost and wait for warmer and lighter days to come. This morning we hear of Christ's baptism, we come to welcome Zachary into the community of the church as a blessing from God. And we are also reminded that from obscure places and bewildering wildernesses that God still speaks to us. That we are loved and in that security of God being with us we can find that purpose of discipleship. To not participate in structures of injustice, to not look the other way. But to reminded that we follow a God who came to be with us.

*Who the Lord has anointed
to proclaim good news to the poor.
bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a]
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn*

Amen