

Sunday 11 January 2009 : The Baptism of Christ

We fall down and get up again

Readings: Genesis 1:1-5; Mark 1:4-11

The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while the Spirit of God swept over the face of the waters. 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.

An old monk was standing at the gate of a monastery, when a stranger walked by. “What do you do in there all day?” the stranger asked. The old monk replied “We fall down and we get up again”.

Gateways are important to us – whatever those gateways might be: a birth, a marriage, a bereavement, a change of job, moving home, retiring and so on. They are moments when we step into something new and see things differently; when we see ourselves differently. They are significant moments for they say something about our identity, our sense of self, about who we are as a person and in relation with others.

But although those gateway moments are hugely significant, they are not moments in isolation; they have a history and they have a future. They are a separation but they are also holding together. The light might be separated from the darkness but in the very act of doing so, we recognise both the light and the dark; the beginning and the end; both the falling down and the getting up again; both the death and the resurrection.

It may be the personal context of preparing to leave St Martin’s but this year more than ever, I’ve come through Christmas and Epiphany and found in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth, a question of whether I am hearing a beginning or an end. At Midnight Mass, I listened to that amazing section from John’s gospel that we call the prologue. The first words may be “In the beginning” but I can see why biblical scholars believe that John wrote this at the end of writing his Gospel – that what we hear is a gateway experience of revelation, that has come through death and resurrection.

I listened to the story of the Magi, of the journey that led them to a stable in Bethlehem; of that encounter sending them through another gateway to journey by another road. At the beginning of his Gospel, as at the end, Matthew gives a picture of revelation that comes from the mouth of Gentiles, Eastern sages or Roman centurions, while the Messiah is rejected by his own people. Like T. S. Eliot I found myself reflecting on the journey of the Magi with the pondering words of “was it a birth or a death?” Was it a beginning or an end?

This Sunday following the Epiphany is marked in the church’s calendar as the Baptism of Christ. We make a sudden leap from the child of Bethlehem to the adult Jesus, a young man of 30, about to enter into a new and defining period of his life. Today we heard Mark’s account of the Baptism in what is probably Mark’s equivalent of John’s prologue. Mark, perhaps more than any of the other Gospel writers recognises the vocation of Jesus in his suffering and death, in his dying and rising. Mark’s gospel is almost devoid of long passages of teaching and he includes few of Jesus’ own words. He pares away all the trimmings to say: see with your eyes, and touch with your hands – this is God revealed in darkness and light, in dying and rising; in falling down and getting up again.

Mark gives us nothing of the 30 years before this moment in the life of Jesus. His Gospel begins with the simple yet extraordinary statement “The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ” and then quite literally plunges straight in. Jesus comes from Nazareth to be baptised in the river Jordan. What drove him, what prompted him to be there at that point, we don’t know. Like the beginning of Genesis, to us looking on, it seems that what came before is without form and void. Yet the Spirit of God moves over this apparently shapeless form and takes Jesus to this gateway, this point of revelation, this point of separation in which all he will become is held together. He plunges down into the water in order to rise again.

Polite Anglican sprinkling does little justice to the powerful imagery of baptism. Mark’s account hits us between the eyes – Jesus plunges into the waters and as he rises again the heavens are split apart, the spirit of God hovers over the deep and a voice says “this is my beloved Son”. There is darkness over the face of the earth and as Jesus dies on the cross, the veil of the temple is split apart, and the voice of a Roman centurion says: Truly this is God’s Son. There is darkness over the waters, the Spirit of God moves over them and a voice says let there be light and there was light. We die in order to live, we fall so that we might get up again, we enter darkness, so that we might recognise light.

If Anglican sprinkling tends, if you excuse the pun, to water down that imagery, then Orthodox icons of the baptism of Christ such as the one on the front cover of your service sheet show this fantastically well – are those patterns that surround Jesus, ripples in the waters or a shroud? Are we looking at an icon of the baptism or of the resurrection, or is this separation of darkness from light in a new creation? Are we looking at death or life? Is this a letting go or a taking on?

The baptism of Christ is a gateway moment, revealing the identity of Christ. It’s a moment of pointing forward, prompting Jesus to embrace his vocation as the son of God, to live out the ministry of the next three years, leading him to the death and resurrection which were to be the fulfilment of that vocation, and the ultimate revelation of God’s glory. But it’s also a moment that emerges from the darkness, from the unknown; from the Spirit of God moving over that darkness and chaos, from which light will emerge.

“What do you do in there all day?” “We fall down and we get up again”.

Six years of living and working in this community has taught me a lot about falling down and getting up again. I don’t think that’s just because of the trend spectacularly started by Rod Beadles that resulted in, I think, seven broken limbs in the space of a year, and was finally manifested in the sight of our Director of Music conducting carol services one-handed. Forgive me if I’ve missed out anyone’s metatarsal in that count!

I think what this community has taught me of what it means to fall down and get up again comes from trying to live our faith, our vocation in a real way. It comes from not being content with polite sprinkling but by taking the risk of plunging into deep waters, not knowing what’s there and not being absolutely sure you’re going to get out of those waters in one piece. It comes from living amidst things that often seem chaotic and without form, but where something deep inside you says that the Holy Spirit sweeps over this chaos, and at some point the light will emerge from the darkness and for a moment at least, you will see and know.

Every time we fall down and scrape our knees something of us is left there on the ground – dust we are and to dust we will return. And in its place comes something new, something formed out of the falling down, something that says that we leave in the dust is not the final

word about who we are, and that instead the final word about who we are is the voice that says “this is my beloved Son”.

I’m grateful for the words of poet Wendell Berry’s in this description of a sycamore:

*There is no year it has flourished in
that has not harmed it. There is a hollow in it
that is its death, though its living brims whitely
at the lip of the darkness and flows outward.
Over all its scars has come the seamless white
of the bark. It bears the gnarls of its history
healed over. It has risen to a strange perfection
in the warp and bending of its long growth.
It has gathered all accidents into its purpose.
It has become the intention and radiance of its dark fate.
It is a fact, sublime, mystical and unassailable.*

*This is my beloved Son.
It is a fact, sublime, mystical and unassailable.*

At the end of the creation story in Genesis, God looks at what has emerged from the darkness and the chaos and sees that it is good.

Today as I come to the end of six years in this place, amidst darkness and light, chaos and order, falling down and getting up again, dying and rising, I think I can hand on heart say, “indeed, it was very good” and for that, to you and to God I am profoundly grateful.