**Sunday 8 January 2017**

**Epiphany 1**

**Sermon**

There is so much written on why Jesus was baptised by John –the whole weird issue of a baptism that was offered for forgiveness of sin –being given to a sinless man –we are left to ponder what the need was for the sinless Jesus to be baptised by John. Even John questioned Jesus about this. And so countless of theologians have unpacked the way Jesus identified with humanity in this act, that he set an example, and that he showed the public who he was as the dove descended on him and the divine voice spoke of family favour. Or perhaps he so identified with humanity that he saw the need for baptism too –remember when the rich young man asked Jesus Good master, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And Jesus replied, why do you call me good? No one is good except God... Perhaps this was his full humanity –and humility- on display.

But to understand his baptism we would also do well to remember that the baptism John preached was scandalous and an insult to any good Jew... some sects within Judaism used baptism as a cleansing ritual prior to entering a particular level of religious community, but it was most commonly understood as being for pagans wanting to convert to Judaism. It was the way they could be cleansed and made worthy. For John to expect Jews to be baptised implied they were not already worthy.

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And it intrigues me –that relationship between John and Jesus –cousins who both had such specific calls on their lives. John –so eccentric, living on the margins of society, called to prepare the way. And although austere and ascetic, able to draw people to him –so even 20 years later and in far distant Ephesus, people were still submitting to the baptism of John. And Jesus –the Messiah –now leaving his obscure life in Nazareth and entering into his public ministry. -Both acting out of obedience to their calling.

And yet what actually happens in the baptism is way more than the obedience of these two young men –what happens is that God acts... God speaks in affirmation to the still wet Jesus, and appears in the form of a descending dove to show his presence with this still wet Jesus.

Let me say on the outset that I don’t fully understand this thing we call baptism.

I understand that we are called to do it –and that the call is significant.

I remember learning this early on as a minister. I had only been ordained a short time when an elderly woman who attended the church I was minister at, took me aside –she explained that she had never been baptised due to some significant event when she was a child -but that when each new minister arrived at the church she explained and they said it was okay for her to receive communion.

I assured her she was welcome at the table of our Lord –but I also said she was also welcome to be baptised... and then she would not have to have this conversation any more... she was so surprised –no one had ever suggested that... I –on the other hand -was surprised no one had offered it... She said she would think about it.

After some more discussion, I realised her apprehension was really more an embarrassment about it all happening in public... so I managed to persuade her that perhaps we could see if there were any others wanting to be baptised... I let the congregation know of the invitation and an elderly man came up to me and said he had been feeling called to be baptised for a very long time –and more recently having dreams of God calling him to be baptised –and he hadn’t known what to do. I was intrigued. With the two of their permission I then told the congregation who was to be baptised, and within another fortnight or so I had three more people asking to be baptised –all aged over 70 years old! –It was not what I expected to be doing as a new minister at all.

But I learnt that baptism is somehow an important step in our Christian walk. And when we try to avoid it, God seems to niggle away at it. For in baptism, somehow something remarkable happens. Now I am not saying that it is magic, or that the unbaptised are doomed. But I am saying that there is something basic to being called to the Christian life that involves baptism.

God affirms us and welcomes us. We are made part of the family of God.

Most of us will not even remember our baptism, given the Presbyterian tendency for infant baptism. But we each know we are –and we know what it involves as we watch new generations of Christian families and new converts being obedient to the command of Jesus –to be baptised. I don’t remember mine, but I know it was Christmas Day 1964, in Armidale Australia... and I know the ritual that would have happened... and the vows my parents made before God and the congregation.

For some, baptism may have been taken more lightly than it ought –timed more about visiting family or a gown to fit the child... but for all it involved significant vows made before the congregated family of God. And for all, it is actually more about what God does than what we do...

Today is one of the classic feast days used historically for baptisms –when the lectionary includes the baptism of Jesus. It is a time for all to reflect on what it means to be a baptised people. Like at Easter and Pentecost, we take time to reflect on how we are going with living out our baptism.

Initiation rites are all through the different religions as a way of overcoming the fear of death. But for Christians it is more than that. It is a recognition that in Christ we are cleansed and given eternal abundant life.

But I am aware that I too often forget my baptism –and the gift of the baptism of other is not just for them, but the reminder for me that I am baptised. Just as when I am at a wedding I am reminded of the significance of my own marriage, here at the baptism of Matthew and Hannah. I am reminded of the significance of my own baptism.

It is a reminder that we too are wet as we walk in our world. Wet with the life giving water that tells us we are in Christ. Wet with the call to share the good news with the people we meet in our daily lives. Which leads me to the reading we had from Acts 10.

When Peter speaks to the people and tells them that God shows no partiality... and explains to the people his faith to a Gentile audience.

He simply speaks what he knows –that the people of Israel had been promised a Saviour –and he is here –he speaks of what he has seen -of Jesus’ baptism and of his acts of healing. Of his death on the cross and his being raised from the dead. Of his command to tell others this good news.

For Peter this understanding comes from a whole lot of things –but he really seems to get it when he and Cornelius are taught this new reality –that there are no favourites in the kingdom of God. Status or pedigree or wealth or experience –none of makes a difference –it is through baptism we are put on an equal footing because we are all made new in Christ.

But baptism, for all its importance, is, most of all, a beginning –it is the start of something new. It only takes up a few verses in Scripture before we are reading on of Jesus being led out into the wilderness to be tempted. Likewise, we are called to move on, still wet, but on the move. Out of the water we move toward who we are called to be. There is a job to be done. Good news to share. I suspect some of us have to be reminded that we are still wet from our own baptism, and so we are sent out.

Peter is able to offer a concise outline of the gospel. Some refer to it as the elevator speech –the basics of faith able to be said in the time you are in a lift... just 2 or 3 minutes at the most... perhaps that is the first bit of wilderness we encounter as a still wet Christian... the challenge to share our own faith story –for we all have one that is uniquely ours. How you came to meet Jesus...

Either you are baptised or God is calling you to be baptised.

And if you are baptised, you are sent out... to be the people of God, made new in Christ.

So be it, Amen.

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