

Genesis 1:1 - 5
Psalm 29
Acts 19:1 - 7
Mark 1:4 – 11

Up to his neck in the river of life

Thinking about how awkward people may have felt queuing to be Baptized by John was a reminder that during the 1980s people in rural districts suffered the effects of a serious economic down turn. The future of farms and businesses was threatened and the stress affected family life. One response was to provide more services in rural areas. In one such district a social worker friend was employed to offer counselling and support. The door to the waiting room at his office held far more power than he at first realized. The closeness of community life meant he had to make pacts to meet people secretly, at church halls or places outside town. To be seen as needing to talk to the Social Worker was to become suspect: regarded as weak or in trouble, as letting the side down. Spouses became suspicious, business partners agitated, friends felt disturbed or ostracised. Help was needed but people found it hard to accept what was given.

When John began to call for Baptism in the Jordan as a sign of repentance the district became disturbed. He came from the desert and manifested all the attributes of the prophets of old. Something was happening but he was quick to point away from himself. A Stronger One was coming; they should prepare. John's Baptism was not the ritual purification of Judaism normally carried out by oneself. It involved submitting to the preacher to be plunged into the waters of the Jordan as a sign of a change of heart and readiness to live a new life. Historically the people had followed Moses through the Red Sea to new life. And Joshua led the people across the Jordan into the land of promise. Now John called them to prepare for a new beginning by passing through the waters with him.

People queued to meet John in the waters of the Jordan, and Jesus joined the queue. It was an odd moment, causing some embarrassment to the Evangelists and the early church. One of the Church Fathers compares it to an encounter between a torch and the Sun. Mark gives us only the bare bones and we hear nothing of the conversation between the two. We are more like observers of something that happened to Jesus alone. Mark's aim is very specific. Jesus is the predicted Stronger One - the saviour and the judge. Everything he tells us indicates the day had dawned when God's offer of salvation would be made to the world. Whereas Adam and Eve had been cast from the Garden and angels with flaming swords barred their re-entry, now the Heavens were opened and the voice of God was heard again in the world. Where the children of Israel had once stood, passing through the Jordan to the land of Promise, now Jesus stood, numbered amongst those who had declared themselves sinners. But in this place he is named the beloved Son. The one who stands with us is the One who stands closest to the heart of God. And the Spirit came to rest on him, which means he is alive with the life-giving energy of God, the energy which subdued the waters of

chaos at creation and created space for all living things. The One whose voice rules over all has a mouthpiece in the world.

Who were they to whom John preached? They were the oppressed and afflicted. They were colonized by a foreign power. They had a faith but had not known the movement of God for centuries. What they most wanted they had no power to deliver. If sin means to turn away from God and live in self-perpetuating isolation, the Baptism of Jesus declares that God has worked to restore the relationship. To those who were lost came the one with the power to re-engage and set free.

This week the news carried a story of the release from prison of the person who, over 20 years ago attempted to assassinate Pope John Paul II. After his recovery the Pope visited the man in prison, where he forgave him for his crime. The footage included the moment of forgiveness. The two men sat close to each other, in total vulnerability, and the Pope spoke to the prisoner. The camera did not dwell there. Whatever the man was feeling, or whatever peace he had managed to arrive at in himself, now he was given was something he could not himself bring about - the forgiveness of the one whom he had wished dead. What we saw on our screens was a person in the process of being released from the consequences of a dastardly deed. And this came to him as a gift from another. The one who came took the risk of facing the hatred and violence that led to the act, and entered into the prison in which the perpetrator was held.

There is a parable here, of what God in Christ has done. When Jesus is Baptized in the Jordan, God takes a chance on us again. God comes to us and enters into the river of our life. God allows himself to be up to his neck in it with us - the mud, the chaos, the awkwardness, the turbulence and the risk - to bring help to people in desperate circumstances. People who cannot themselves create the presence of God.

After Jesus had stood up to his neck in chaos with John, he embarked on his mission of preaching and healing, which led to his suffering and death. His immersion in the Jordan anticipates his death, and his Baptism allows us to understand the significance of all that follows. It may have seemed embarrassing that Jesus joined the queue of those who responded to John. But the Gospels witness that here we see God who is not remote or unconcerned with our situation. God comes in search of us. God is found among us as one who shares everything with us. And God does this so that we no longer be lost, but find the way to complete our journey home.