

## Revd. Terry Ward-Hall, 10 January 2021

The last time I spoke to you, just 5 days before Christmas, I encouraged you to think about the what, where, when and why of the visit by the angel Gabriel to Mary. I think today's passage invites these and many more questions, not least of which is why does Mark's gospel ignore the story surrounding Jesus' birth and plunge straight into his baptism?

Whilst there's a multiplicity of valid answers, first and foremost I'm continually drawn back to what I and my dear puppet friend Ralph, said about the general role of prophets during our Advent videos and sermons and about the specific role of the prophet Isaiah.

For it was Isaiah who had predicted that John the Baptist and Jesus would come to Israel; the one to be a voice crying in the wilderness preparing the way for the Messiah; the other to be the expected king and saviour – not only of the Jews, but also of all humankind.

Baptism was nothing new; the Jews often baptized Gentiles who had converted to Judaism. But to baptize a Jew as a sign of repentance, as John did, was an extremely radical departure from the custom, to say the least.

What's more, John's clothes which would not have looked out of place on the prophet Elijah some 800 years earlier, were in stark contrast to the expensive long-flowing robes worn by the 1<sup>st</sup> century religious leaders as a symbol of their high social, religious and professional status. It's as if John's striking appearance reinforced his radical message.

There is no doubt that John was charismatic; he had a large following and many believed he was the first genuine prophet to speak since Micah some 400 years earlier, but John was having none of it: another would come who would be infinitely greater than he was.

The fact that John said he wasn't fit even to tie up the sandals of the one greater than him shows true humility because lacing up sandals was a menial task normally undertaken by a slave.

Throughout his gospel, Mark never uses a paragraph when one sentence will suffice; he offers short, sharp accounts of what Jesus did rather than what he said.

Unlike in Matthew's account, Mark's has no dialogue, just a simple statement: 'At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan'.

From this and the other accounts, though, it is easy to flesh out the when, where and how:

- at the beginning of Jesus' ministry
- in the river Jordan
- by fully immersing Jesus under the water

Much more difficult is the why.

In verse 4 it says John was offering people a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. Yet Jesus is the one person on earth who has never sinned so why did he need to be baptized by John?

I think the first point to remember is that John was God's appointed messenger; that was the primary role of all prophets.

So by being baptized by John, Jesus was endorsing John's ministry. But perhaps more significantly, Jesus was completely identifying himself with our sins and failures enabling him later to become the substitute for our sins on the cross. And of course, he models an example for all of us to follow.

But I think, the most significant point from Mark's point of view is that the reader is put in no doubt whatsoever at the very start of his gospel that this is the story of the Son of God.

Here at the public baptism of the Son of God we see the perfect embodiment of the triune God with the Father's pleasure spoken directly from heaven and the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus in the form of a dove. Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

When I was younger I wondered why the Holy Spirit was not symbolized by a falcon – the 1<sup>st</sup> century traditional symbol of a princely authority, because Jesus is the Prince of Peace, as we heard in our Christmas readings.

But I remember once in the Lincolnshire countryside seeing a falcon dive bomb to kill and fly off with its prey clutched between its talons. So, I think the dove is much more fitting and more symbolic of the Spirit. If you think back to the story of Noah and the great flood, it is a dove that returns to the ark with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its beak.

The olive leaf was the long awaited sign of new life, just as Christian baptism is the sign of new life for us today. We are baptized into a new life as a follower of Christ, declared publicly and in obedience to Christ's command to make disciples of all nations.

On our last visit to Israel, all of us took the opportunity in turn to step into the River Jordan and one by one have water poured over our head as a symbol of the renewal of our baptismal vows which we had just recited on the bank-side. The occasion was partly surreal whilst at the same time very tangible.

The heavens were not torn asunder; a dove didn't descend on us but I for one was in no doubt whatsoever that in that particular moment it was as if God was saying to me 'Terry, you are my son, my beloved, with you I am well pleased'

Let's finish with a short prayer.

Father in heaven, preserve in us and all people the new life of baptism. We thank you that you delight in us just as you did your Son at his baptism. May we too be blessed today and evermore.

Amen