

## **Sermon for the Baptism of Jesus 10/1/21 Mark 1:4-11**

St Mark is very terse, almost curt – you can read the whole Gospel out loud in 40 minutes. He doesn't put words in where he doesn't need them. So we should take note of what he says. He is straight in with almost no introduction.

After telling us about John the Baptist's Bush Tucker Trial diet, and how he shouts about road-building in the desert, he tells us how important Jesus is, and then baptises Jesus.

But despite him saying how great Jesus is we see right away Mark's big theme of Jesus as the servant and sacrifice. The whole cosmos is impacted by Jesus' acts of humility in his baptism and death.

Why does Jesus get baptised? John's baptism is all about people acknowledging their sins, but Christians believe Jesus wasn't a sinner – so he didn't need to repent, and say sorry to God. After all he was God! So what's the baptism about?

The baptism of Jesus is on his part the acceptance and inauguration of his mission as God's suffering Servant. He allows himself to be numbered among sinners; he is already "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" as John tells us. This is a great gesture of self-emptying (kenosis – Phil. 2).

Mark's gospel is short, so he chooses his words carefully – and one that we might miss is the word he uses when he tells us that when Jesus comes up out of the water the heavens tear open and the Holy Spirit descends.

The heavens aren't parted like curtains – the word he uses is *σχίζω*, [*schizo*] which means to tear or split apart (we know it from words like schizophrenic).

This has several implications for us: first is that Mark only uses this word twice – once here at Jesus' baptism in water, and once at Jesus' crucifixion at the other end of the gospel. They act like bookends to contain the gospel within. More than that, in Mark 10:38, Jesus refers to his coming death as a "baptism". So there are two "baptisms", that happen and St Mark uses the same word for 'split' or 'tear' around those baptisms at either end of the gospel.

The second thing for us to notice is, when that word is used – in the first one this tearing allows the Holy Spirit to descend on Jesus, making him the

Messiah. Notice that this is not making him the Son of God, he is already the Son of God – Jesus is both the Messiah and the Son of God, but they aren't the same thing. St Mark makes sure we know this in verse one of the Gospel he tells us that this is “the beginning of the Good News (or Gospel) of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God”.

But this tearing of the heavens is a sign that any barrier between God and people is being removed in and for and by Christ. Israel had pleaded for God to intervene decisively: “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down” (MT) we read in Isa 64:1. Now that plea is answered!

That same mechanism is in play when Jesus dies and the massive, thick curtain that divided the Holy of Holies in the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem from the less important parts of the Temple, that curtain was torn in two from top to bottom (Mk 15:38). This wasn't easy – the curtain was as thick as the span of your hand (c. 9cm or about 4 inches, [Midrash HaGadol](#) on Exodus 26:31; [Babylonian Talmud Yoma 72b](#)).

What is that all about? Well we can now come to God and God can come to us as we enter the Holy of Holies ‘through’ Christ. The letter to the Hebrews 10:19-20 tells us this, it says:

<sup>19</sup>Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary [of the Temple] by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup>by the new and living way that he opened for us through the *curtain (that is, through his flesh)*, <sup>21</sup>and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup>let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

The veil being torn from top to bottom was Christ Himself! Torn on the cross. Something we remember and make present as we break or tear the bread in the Eucharist. No doubt the veil in the Temple in Jerusalem was literally torn as a great symbol and as a sign of way in and out for all, but the greater thing is the tearing of Christ and what it does for us.

Christ is the way to the Father. This is symbolized in the fact that the High Priest had to enter the Holy of Holies through the veil. But as we have heard

He was the veil to the Holy of Holies, and through His death, the faithful now have access to the sanctuary. The Church teaches that Christ has removed the barriers between God and humanity, and now we may approach Him with confidence and boldness (cf: Heb. 4:14-16).

So how do we access this access? It is by our own baptism (cf. 1 Pet. 3:21; Heb. 10:22) and by our taking Holy Communion. Our baptism means we enter into Christ's death with him, and rise with him to life. Our receiving Communion means we have his life within us. Our baptism shows the way we must walk in newness of life as his beloved children.

We can enter the Holy of Holies through Christ and his death – he acts as high priest. He acts as the anointed one – which he is – anointed at his baptism, not with oil but the HS. Remember Messiah and Christ both means “anointed”.

Baptism is open to all because in *his* Baptism, Jesus shows that God comes to us, to welcome us. He spoke of his Passion, his death, which he was to suffer in Jerusalem, as a "Baptism". The blood and water that flowed from the pierced side of the crucified Jesus foreshadow, speak of, and show us the sacraments of new life of Baptism and the Eucharist (1 Jn 5:6-8).

Already then at his baptism Jesus and Mark are anticipating the "baptism" of his bloody death on the cross. The end is in sight at the beginning. And Mark makes sure his readers get this – no one else sees or hears all this except Jesus, and those who are hearing or reading Mark's Gospel. We are very honoured. Mark wants us to get this. We see with the eyes of Jesus.

God turns things upside down. Instead of guarding boundaries, God now crosses boundaries. Instead of remaining in the temple, God breaks out to become available everywhere (symbolised by the tearing of the curtain). Instead of withdrawing from defilement, God spreads holiness. Instead of working from the centre, God works from the margins. God sends an anointed one who does not dominate but who undergoes persecution and death in the service of others.

*[see Rhoads, David; Joanna Dewey; Donald Michie. Mark as Story . Fortress Press. Kindle Edition]*

[Three times Jesus is decreed vocally to be the Son: at his Baptism (Mk 1:11); at the Transfiguration (Mk 9:7) and the Crucifixion (through the centurion, 15:39). The Crucifixion is called a baptism by Jesus (Mk 10:38). Jesus' glory is revealed in all three. Two "baptisms" book end the transfiguration, the glory of the Son, shown to us, as we recall St John saying in the prologue to his Gospel.]

God says "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" and this is full of scriptural echoes. In Ps 2:7 God says to the king of Israel, "You are my son; today I have begotten you," and promises him all the nations of the earth as an inheritance. In Isaiah, God speaks of a servant who would faithfully carry out his will: "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him" (Isa 42:1). Jesus is the Messiah-King and chosen servant on whom the Spirit rests.

Episcopal priest, Fr Michael K Marsh and Interrupting the Silence, Jan 8 2012 writes:

"Creation and Jesus baptism are God's gifts to humanity. Everything God does God does for humanity. Jesus did not need to be baptized. We needed him to be baptized. The baptismal water did not sanctify Jesus; he sanctified the baptismal water. His baptism is not the means by which we identify with him, but the means by which he identifies with us. Our baptism allows us to participate in his baptism. He came to us that we might come to him.

Through Jesus our humanity was present and baptized in his baptism. Our humanity, [derived from Blessed Mary,] was the humanity upon which the spirit descended. Our humanity was the humanity to whom the Father spoke and with whom he was well pleased. Our humanity was recreated in Jesus' baptism. In baptism we are a new creation, a new being.

Every time we return to the baptismal waters we claim our identity in Jesus as beloved sons and daughters. Every time we return to the baptism waters God again manifests and reveals himself in humanity. Every time we return to the baptismal waters we return to that first day of light, love, life, and the promise of all that might be."

In both his Baptisms Christ tears open the way to God, and God comes to us. We are his through our Baptism, and remain his through Communion. Amen.