Sermon for 1st in Ordinary Year B

Readings: Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

i

In today’s readings we have two creation stories: the first and obvious example is from the *Book of Genesis* which tells the familiar story of the forming of the heavens and the earth. The other creation story is perhaps not so obvious, but the account of Jesus’ baptism is the beginning of the story of the re-creation of the world, the first days of a ministry which will ultimately culminate in the renewal of the heavens and the earth. The essential link between the two stories is the Holy Spirit.

In Genesis, the Spirit of God hovers over the waters of chaos as God brings order, shape and purpose to the cosmos; in Mark 1 the Spirit of God is once again hovering above the waters of the Jordan when God announces the arrival of his Son, which begins the redemption of the whole of creation.

To a degree, both stories are understated. Yes, they are dramatic, but each story is told in a calm and easy manner, far from the explosive descriptions you might associate today with modern science’s ‘Big bang’ theory. Even Jesus’ baptism, after the sudden and dramatic intrusion of God’s divine endorsement of his Son ebbs quietly away into the most understated account of the Temptations of Jesus to be found in the synoptic gospels. It is as if both stories are saving themselves for a punch line that is yet to be delivered.

ii

The same Spirit of God is at work on the banks of the Jordan the day Jesus turns up asking John for baptism. This poses an obvious conundrum to Christians and the gospel writers are as keenly aware of it as any subsequent generation: how is it that Jesus asks for baptism which is a sign of the forgiveness of sins when the efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross is predicated on the fact that Jesus was without sin?

Some commentators suggest it is more an anointing for Jesus than a baptism – it is the inauguration of his public ministry and the designation of him as Messiah – which means the ‘anointed one’ – and therefore the Spirit’s descent upon Jesus in the act of his baptism represents his anointing for the role he is about to take up.

Other commentators take the view that Jesus should be seen as a representative figure for the people of Israel and for humanity as a whole. In this light, Jesus is identifying with sinful humanity. For he who knew no sin himself was to be made to bear the sins of the world.

In modern western society we have become accustomed to thinking about individual rights and responsibilities and have largely lost the notion of corporate responsibility. In Jesus’ society, the family group or nation determined the status and role of the individual. Taint the reputation of the family and every individual member of it is besmirched. Honour any individual and the whole family swells with pride.

Such societies have predominated in world history until Post-Renaissance western culture took hold with its individualistic understandings of personality and society. In societies like that of 1st century Palestine individuals only have identity in relation to the group to which they belong, chiefly family, clan and nation. Technically these societies are called “collectivist” or “dyadic” – meaning oriented towards the other for identity.

In such a society it is much less problematical to see the whole group in the individual and the individual through the whole group. So it would make more immediate sense in those days for Jesus to be seen as representing the whole people of God and bearing their sins, than it is for modern western people to grasp.

iii

In our reading from Acts 19:1-7 we see another example of this collectivist or dyadic thinking.

The whole of the Christian gospel rests on this collectivist or dyadic understanding of personhood. Just as Jesus identifies with the people of Israel in particular and humankind in general and thereby can represent them, taking their sins upon himself in baptism and on the cross - after the resurrection it is the turn of humankind to identify with Jesus so that we might share his resurrection life and his righteousness.

Whilst baptism by John was Jesus’ way of identifying himself with us in order to share our sin – so through Christian baptism, we have the opportunity to identify with Jesus and share in his life. This is why the group of the former Baptist’s followers encountered by Paul in Acts 19:1-7 are required to undergo another baptism. They have identified themselves with the collective sin of the old Israel through John’s baptism, but now they need Christian baptism in order to share in the righteousness of the new Israel which Jesus has secured.

There is clearly some confusion in some parts of the early Church, especially in Corinth which is mentioned in Acts 19:1. Wesley notes that the former Baptist’s followers were baptised upon Paul’s instruction, but that Paul is recorded not as having performed the baptisms himself, but only of having laid hands upon them after baptism in an act of blessing to confer the Holy Spirit (Acts 19:5-6).

If we take this snippet of information and place it alongside what we know about the Church in Corinth as revealed in Paul’s Corinthian correspondence, we may see that Paul refrained from administering the baptisms himself in order to avoid the sort of confusion that arose in Corinth where those baptised by Paul said they belonged to Paul, and those baptised by Apollos to Apollos and those by Peter to Peter.

Such thinking is still dyadic in that they define themselves as a group, but Paul is at pains to make sure that the all those baptised realise that who administers the baptism is of little importance – what matters is that all are baptised into Christ.

It is our relationship with Christ that saves, not our relationship with any particular servant of Christ. It is the work of the one Holy Spirit that holds everyone and everything in perfect unity. In Ephesians 4:3-4 we read:

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit…one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all…

The one true marker of authentic Christian faith is reception of the Holy Spirit. The group of former Baptist followers Paul encountered had already been converted to Christianity in terms of their allegiance, but the crucial question in Paul’s mind was: “Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?”

As we saw in the case of the first gentile convert, Cornelius the centurion in Acts 10:47, it was because Cornelius had received the Holy Spirit that Peter decided he must be baptised and accepted into the new Israel:

Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water, [asks Peter]? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have. So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter shows a similar reticence to baptise in that episode in Caesarea as Paul does in Ephesus. Perhaps both these great leaders of the Church realised that they risked inadvertently creating factions within the Church when all that mattered to them was whether the people had received the Holy Spirit or not.

The mention in Acts 19:7 that there were ‘about 12 men in all’ is a way of saying that the Church is complete. The group of former Baptist followers which Paul discovered in Ephesus is now as fully Church as they are in Corinth or Rome or Jerusalem or anywhere else. Who first “converted” this group of ex-Baptist believers is unknown, but whatever preparation work has taken place, their entry into the faith is incomplete until they have received the Holy Spirit, whether receiving the Spirit before baptism like Cornelius or after baptism as here in Ephesus is of little consequence.

This passage poses momentous questions for ecumenism. Does the Church’s unity only exist when we have achieved organic unity? Or does the unity of the Church already exist through baptism into Christ and the reception of the Holy Spirit?

Is our allegiance to the Bishop of Rome, or Luther, or Wesley, or Canterbury or our Patriarch an acceptable expression of Christian renewal, if those allegiances divide the Body of Christ?

Or are such allegiances a reflection of humankind’s sheer irreconcilable diversity and what matters more is that all those who claim the name of Christ should display the Spirit of Christ – for our unity is a spiritual and heavenly unity rather than a visible and earthly unity?

For the past century or more ecumenists have argued that the historic visible Church on earth should reflect the spiritual unity of the Church in heaven and therefore organic union is the only legitimate goal for ecumenical dialogue, however remote a prospect. But as the ecumenical movement stutters and the Protestant side of the Church continues to subdivide as quickly as it increases in size, that question will be asked more often in the years ahead.

If the independent Pentecostal style church becomes the world’s norm for ecclesial expression of the Christian faith, as some predict it will within the next century, we will have to face up to this question: Can the Church claim unity in baptism and the Holy Spirit is sufficient, or do we deny the power of the reconciling gospel for as long as some belong to Paul and some belong to Apollos?

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**March 2017**