

Beloved One - beloved community

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 8 January 2017

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 1A

Isaiah 42:1-9; Song: *Anthem* by Leonard Cohen; Matthew 3: 13-17

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <http://www.pittstreetuniting.org.au/> under "Sunday Reflections" tab

It always amazes me how quickly the lectionary has Jesus grow up. And in the year when we focus on Matthew's gospel, that transition, from the visit of the Wise Ones to the adult Jesus' approaching John for baptism, is particularly precipitous.

Most of us associate baptism with the naming of babies. The last lovely baby we baptised at Pitt Street was Laurana, Tim and Jenny's baby grand-daughter. When Laurana came to church at Christmas, with her parents, my son Andrew remembered the story of her naming, how her dad, Jeff, had liked the name of a character from the movie *Men in Black*. On the day that Laurana was baptised Andrew, who doesn't usually stick around for my sermons, headed to my office computer after the baptism and googled Men in Black to find out about Laurana. He will always remember Laurana's name when she comes to church. Her name has a story.

Our names often have a fascination for us. I grew up being one of only five people in Aotearoa New Zealand who had the surname Mayman. The others being my parents Michael and Isobel, and my brother and sister Geoff and Mary. My father was an only son, and my grandfather Mayman who emigrated to New Zealand from England as a two-year old with his parents, was also an only child.

While I was a graduate student in the US, the brand new exciting internet made it possible to check out other Maymans. I was fascinated to learn that many of the US Maymans were Jewish, with ancestral ties to Eastern European countries like Poland. Tracing back our Maymans in England, the trail goes cold in the late 1700s. It seems possible that a family of Eastern European Jews migrated, assimilated and converted to Anglicanism. When I retire, I plan to find out more about this name I share with people who are ethnically and religiously quite different to my self-understanding of what it meant to be named Mayman.

But today, listening to Jesus' baptism story, we are invited to think about baptism differently. Not about the name that marks Jesus or us as individuals or members of a family, but about the naming of human persons as Beloved, as children of God, as blessed by the Divine Presence.

Your name is Beloved. Today this gospel invites you again into that name, into that identity.

This morning we heard the story of Jesus' baptism from the gospel of Matthew, that most Jewish of gospels. Matthew's is an outsider gospel, born in pain and rejection.

Matthew's Christian community of Jews had seen themselves as bearing the true meaning of the Old Testament and Israel's tradition. Yet that role was being challenged by the resurgent early rabbinic schools of thought that had emerged from Pharisaism after the fall of the Jerusalem temple in 70CE. Matthew's community is finding itself edged out and so throughout Matthew's gospel telling of Jesus' story is a claiming of the place of the community within mainstream Jewish tradition.

In today's baptism story, details that might seem insignificant to us were loaded with meaning for Matthew's Jewish Christian audience.

The Jordan River, the site of Jesus' baptism, is the same place where Elijah ascended in a fiery horse-drawn chariot, and his spirit fell in double portion on Elisha, his successor (2 Kings 1:11). Elijah's assumption was taken as a sign that he would some-day return as the inaugurating moment of the Day of the Lord, prophesied by the prophet Malachi (Malachi 4:5). Judgement plays a major role in Matthew's gospel and it is a complex theme we will explore in the weeks and months ahead.

John the Baptist, in his "*clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist*," looks exactly the way that Elijah is described in 2 Kings 1:8 ("*a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist*"). And where there is an Elijah, there's a twice-as-powerful Elisha. So it is with John and Jesus.

This all lends support to the text's portrayal of Jesus' baptism as much more than a ritual cleansing. Coming up from the river, Jesus receives his portion of God's Spirit, punctuated by a voice from heaven that identifies him as God's Own, "*the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased*" (Matthew 3:17).

The direct words of God are not often recorded in the gospels, yet here we have a public announcement by God to whomever will hear. *This is my Own, the Beloved.*

Being Beloved of God was not something that Jesus earned by his performance, by his mission, ministry or miracles. He was proclaimed Beloved before he had done anything much worth praising.

Also, isn't it interesting that when God does speak, God doesn't give instructions?

God doesn't even echo the words of Jesus: '*Love one another*'

The one time we hear the voice of God we hear the words: "*This is my Own, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*"

The other thing that the story tells us that God said was Listen. How are we to understand that story of God's voice heard by the riverside, and the presence of the holy dove announcing blessing.

Is such a wonder limited to an ancient people who lived with an understanding of an interventionist God, or can it yet have meaning and power for people who understand and experience God as Spirit, as Divine Presence?

Traditionally the church has understood Jesus as the one who will come to save the people from their sins.

In this scenario, theologians have understood the reputedly sinless Jesus asking to be baptised as an act of solidarity with sinners.

John Dominic Crossan, one of the Jesus Seminar scholars, suggests an alternative interpretation which is true to the Jewishness of Matthew's gospel. He argues that for John, baptism was a re-enactment of the entry of the Hebrew people from the wilderness, through the Jordan, into the Promised Land.

Crossan suggests that John was trying to establish a body of people who would remember their own history, and be dedicated to overthrowing the Romans and re-asserting Jewish sovereignty when the appropriate time came.

Jesus claimed the symbolism of baptism for his own ministry. He was trying to lead people to a new reign of God: a new way of understanding God; a new sense of what it means to be God's people; a new promised land; a new politics...vastly different from the politics of Empire.

So, it was appropriate that Jesus should begin his ministry by going through the waters of the Jordan connecting the past to a new future.

This story is told, not just for historic interest, but because the readers of Matthew - and we ourselves - are invited to participate.

To participate in two ways:

First: in the experience of God's acceptance and love, to know ourselves as Beloved.

Second: in the preparation for ministry and mission.

Interpreters of the Bible have paid far more attention to God's words traditionally rendered: "*You are my son, the beloved*" than to the words: "*with whom I am well pleased*."

The traditional interpretation has been used to draw attention to the separation of Jesus from the rest of humanity, rather than affirming that we too are God's children and God is pleased with us.

So Christianity is often seen as being about people with whom God is not very pleased, believing that Jesus is God's only son so that we can go to heaven.

But that is not the message conveyed by Jesus in the gospels. He does not go around insisting that people sign up to beliefs about him. His ministry unfolds with the message of acceptance and love. He takes his baptism experience of knowing that he is Beloved of God, and invites all the outsiders he encounters to understand themselves as Beloved.

The gospels tell the story of Jesus travelling from community to community, accepting the humanity and hospitality of all.

Faith, in the sense of believing certain things, is not the new law that Jesus demands us to obey.

The Jesus story tells us of God with us:

- of God's energy for us
- of God's solidarity with us.
- of God's suffering with us.

The Jesus story tells of Divine Presence not as some supernatural being, but as an aspect of reality that can be known to us, if we will only do as the voice commands: listen.

God says to Jesus, Divine Presence says to you, to me, to everyone: "*You are my son, you my daughter; you are my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.*"

These are words about relationship and appreciation, not about more things that we ought to do.

Jesus' message through his ministry was one of relationship and appreciation.

To those whom he met and ministered to he conveyed that they were God's beloved:

- that God was well pleased with them
- whoever they were
- whatever their family circumstances were or weren't
- whatever their social status
- whatever they believed about God or did not believe

The important thing was that God believed in them!

When we know this to be true for ourselves, we are freed from doubt and anxiety about who we are and we are commissioned by the Spirit to live lives of love, peace, justice and inclusiveness, to follow the path blazed by Jesus of Nazareth.

Biblical commentator and preaching coach, David Lose, suggests that this week Ministers should invite our congregations to say to themselves:

"I am God's child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use me to change the world."

And we are called to believe that not only of ourselves but of everyone we encounter.

What if we saw all people as beloved? Would that change the world?

At baptism, we begin our journey as God's friends.

We are set on a path that may lead us to new discovery and possibility for transformation. It is indeed a new year in our lives!

We don't do this from a place of perfection. Recalling Leonard Cohen, "*Ring the bells that still can ring, forget your perfect offering.*" Your reality, your brokenness, are enough. In the season of epiphany we look to the light, and we remember, "*there's a crack, a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.*"

We imperfect, yet beloved ones, are called to join with Divine Presence/Sacred Energy bringing compassion to people and justice to earth.

We are called to join and to create the Beloved Community.

As the Spirit touched Jesus at his baptism, so the Spirit touches us, connects us, and sweeps us along in life that is life-giving.

"You, too, are God's beloved child."

From the naming and acceptance we experience, we move to live our ministries - which are nothing more nor less than our response to the God who first loved us.

May there be blessings on your journey through this new year.

Link to video of Anthem with lyrics.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mDTph7mer3I>