

Baptism, beginning and belonging

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 7 January 2018

A Contemporary Reflection by Rev Dr Margaret Mayman

Epiphany 1B

Genesis 1: 1-5; “God created” by Madeline Engle excerpted from
And it was good: reflections on beginnings; Mark 1:4-11

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

Happy 2018! It’s hard to believe that it was just two weeks ago many of us were gathered here on the morning of Christmas Eve. Since then I’ve done a lot of spring cleaning in New Zealand (first at my parents’ house, where I also helped my father with the reverent task of sorting through my mother’s belongings; but, also, at Andrew’s flat where I helped him spring clean his room and restore his bathroom to an acceptable state of sanitation). I joked about hygiene when I was telling people that I was going to Auckland to Andrew’s flat as part of my trip to New Zealand. When I saw that bathroom, I realised it was no joke!

Now, just today, I’ve looked at my office here at church and the only word to describe it is chaos. I know where I next need to clean and tidy and sort. It was chaotic when I left at the end of the day on Thursday the 7th of December, the day that the marriage Equality Law passed, not knowing at that stage that I would not be back again until two days before Christmas.

Because we hosted Clover Moore, the Lord Mayor and the Hon Michael Kirby for the nine lessons and carols service, John Floyd kindly transformed the chaos into “piles” so they could use my office before the service without causing complete embarrassment to the church. Now the piles must be dealt with or 2018 will be as chaotic as 2017 sometimes was.

At the end of the year, and at the beginning of a new year it is easy to be focused on what needs to be done. In gathering to worship, we turn our focus instead onto how we want to be in this new year. We focus on who we are, as people of faith; we focus on the One to whom we belong. On who we are, and whose we are.

In our society and culture, and much of our protestant religious heritage, there’s been so much focus on achievement and doing that it’s easy to lose touch with being, and with knowing ourselves as people who are loved just as we are. As people who are beloved.

This Sunday our faith story focuses on the baptism of Jesus. But wow, didn’t Jesus grow up fast. A couple of weeks ago he was in the manger and now, in this story, he’s nearly thirty and being baptised by John in the Jordan. It leaves us a bit breathless, missing the sense that Jesus was formed as a person over many years, through childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Through being loved and protected by his mother Mary and his father Joseph. Through his relationships with them, and with his sisters and brothers, his friends and the tiny community of Nazareth.

Jesus baptism marks the beginning of his ministry but it is a story of self-awareness. I know that there are people in our congregation who have not been baptised, but for most of us here, baptism, either as a child or as an adult, was part of our life journey. When we reflect on Mark's gospel story of the baptism of Jesus, it invites to reflect on what baptism means for us now, in this new year.

If you are listening to this and thinking, *but I haven't been baptised*, I hope you will include yourself in the reflection because what concerns me is less the act of immersion into, or sprinkling of water, but the connection between baptism and vocation. But also, if on listening to this, you would like to be baptised, please know that baptism can happen at any stage in your life journey.

The baptism of Jesus was an epiphany. Epiphany means "showing forth." The baptism of Jesus is an epiphany, not only in revealing Jesus, but in modelling what should happen to all who are baptised: we should all have an epiphany of God's purposes. In hearing the words of blessing, "*you are my beloved Child*" Jesus received a revelation of who he was - and who he was to become in partnership with Divine Presence.

The lectionary compilers choice of pairing the baptism story with a section of the Genesis creation story makes this connection, as does Madeleine L'Engels' reflection on our role as co-creators with God.

In the Genesis creation story, the earth and the earth creatures emerge from chaos. What is the chaos from which we will emerge this year? This is not just a call to clean the cobwebs and sort the paperwork. It is a call to reorient our lives, our personal lives and our political lives; to reorient them towards healing and reconciliation, towards justice and peace. God, the Divine Presence, seeks to move the human family from the chaos of division and inequality towards community - into community.

Inequality leaves us formless and void, effectively returning the social world for all peoples to a time of chaos.

In our faith, in the midst of this chaos, comes good news. With the Divine Presence, we may join a movement of the spirit that is at work to bring the shape of justice and love out of the chaos. When we are baptised, and when we reaffirm our baptism in confirmation or simply in expressing our faith through our lives, we turn away from chaos and commit ourselves to work with God for a world where every person knows themselves to be beloved.

New Testament scholar, FF Bruce writes of John the Baptist, "*Of all the religious movements in Palestine on the eve of Christianity none is more directly relevant to Christianity itself than the ministry of John the Baptist.*" (*New Testament History*, 152) John the Baptist played a significant role in the helping form the socio-religious movement initiated by Jesus, that came to be called Christianity.

In our text today, verse 4 describes a place, a person and a proclamation. John was in the desert, preaching forgiveness of sins. In verses 5 and 6, Mark says that John's proclamation had power; and people came from Jerusalem, Judea and the vicinity of the Jordan River to hear the message. John was walking on the wild side, wearing a garment of camel hair, tied up with a leather belt, and eating locusts and honey. Yum.

John was an eschatological prophet, announcing that God was about to end the present evil age, marked by injustice, exploitation, violence and death, and God would complete the manifestation of the realm of God as a world of justice, mutual respect, sharing and eternal life. John saw Jesus as the one who would bring in this new age. John's mission was to prepare people for the coming world by inviting them to repent and to be baptised. While John would prepare the way, Jesus would be the one to begin the transformation.

The story tells us that Jesus was among the baptised. The opening of the heavens and the descent of the Spirit like a dove upon Jesus are symbols of confirmation that Jesus was in fact the one, would be the one who would bring in God's new community of justice and reconciliation.

And then there are the Divine words: "*You are my Child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.*"

African American writer W E B Du Bois wrote of John in his essay "The Coming of John". He spoke of John's change of consciousness in relation to Du Bois' own understanding of race. Of what is wrong with the racist world and also of the vision of how the world and people should be.

Quoting from Du Bois writing about John: "*He looked now for the first time sharply about him, and wondered he had seen so little before. He grew slowly to feel almost for the first time the Veil that lay between him and the white world; he first notices now the oppression that had not seemed oppression before, different rather than natural, restraints and slights that in his boyhood days had gone unnoticed or been greeted with a laugh.*" (Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 173.)

In effect, Du Bois describes an epiphany that took place over time. We may think that epiphanies don't happen to us because we don't have experiences of the spirit coming down over us as a dove. But epiphanies can dawn slowly too.

So rather than thinking about John the Baptist (as I often do) as not quite as on track as Jesus, or as a grumpy man focused on sin and the end of the world, I hope we might see him as one who is calling us toward transformation. Bringing our attention to Jesus who was God's beloved that we might all know ourselves as beloved, and therefore as called to a vocation of love and justice and healing and reconciliation.

Many of us live unaware of our privilege. For the majority of us who are white, we do not see racism and xenophobia, and we live without awareness of their destructive effects on the whole community.

John's message, I believe, was not wrong and therefore to be ignored. He was Jesus's cousin, part of his formational community of family, and John's ministry shaped Jesus as a young man. And so, seeing John, hearing John, through the lens of Du Bois, we might consider this year, our complicity in structural sins, like racism, and economic inequality. And respond in repentance and through participation in movements that will work toward a more just society.

In the season of epiphany, what epiphany do you need for this new year?

Recalling Madeleine L'Engle's words: "Every single one of us, without exception, is called to co-create with God. No one is too unimportant to have a share in the making or unmaking of the final showing-forth. Everything we do either draws the Kingdom of love closer, or pushes it further off. That is a fearful responsibility, but when God made "humanity in our image" responsibility went with it."

The call to responsibility and the call to repentance for personal shortcomings and communal, structural sinfulness like racism comes to us, not just as a command, but with the assurance of Divine presence.

Even with a torn-open sky, the words that resound are "beloved," and "listen"; hardly words of judgment or words that should inspire fear. How do you experience God's loving faithfulness and God's care in your own life and in the life of your congregation or community? How do you think about your baptism? When you think about it, can you imagine yourself as beloved? Can you imagine each child and adult, in your family, in this congregation, and in the community as a beloved child of God? Would pausing to remember that affect how we treat one another?

There is perhaps no more meaningful experience in the life of a Minister than the act of baptism, when we pour living waters over the one to be baptized. We are saying to our brother or sister in Christ: "*The Holy Spirit be upon you, child of God, disciple of Christ, member of the church.*" As we say that as Ministers, the congregation joins in the affirmation, seeing the newly baptized one through the eyes of God, in a way affirming them as beloved, acknowledging them as called by name and precious in God's sight.

This beautiful bond shapes us as a community. It is as if we saying to one another "*In this family, water is thicker than blood.*"

God has formed us in love and found us good, and yet we see ourselves and one another as flawed and deficient. What would happen if we saw ourselves – and one another – as created for God's glory? (Isaiah 43:7)

Could we understand ourselves and others as anything but beloved of God?

May we live into this truth into the new year that lies before us.