

Baptism of the Lord

Our passage from Mark's gospel is, in a number of ways, about "foundations", about something on which we and others can stand.

In a way, the baptism of John the Baptist had to do with foundations. Here, the people were returning to the wilderness to be baptized. There is actually, in the testimony of scripture of the Old Testament, reference to the wilderness as a sort of ideal period. So, for example, in the book of Jeremiah, we hear,

Thus says the LORD:
I remember the devotion of your youth,
your love as a bride,
how you followed me in the wilderness,
in a land not sown.
Israel was holy to the LORD,
the first fruits of his harvest...

And a predecessor, actually—or one who is considered a predecessor of the prophet Jeremiah, namely, the prophet Hosea—mentions how God will return the people of Israel to the wilderness:

Therefore, I will now allure her [this is the language of the prophet Hosea],
and bring her into the wilderness,
and speak tenderly to her.
From there I will give her her vineyards,
and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt.

So, what John the Baptist was about seems to be returning to the spiritual roots of the people of Israel.

Now, what we have in the baptism of Jesus very much has to do with the roots of our own faith—and those roots have to do with the identification of Jesus as the Son, the one who is the beloved, the one with whom God is well pleased, and the one also who is given of the very Spirit of God. "The heavens were opened, and the Spirit descended upon him in the form of a dove."

So, considering, first of all, the matter of Jesus as Son of God. Now, here we have just one person identified in this way, as being Son of God. And, it's on the basis of him that we are included as God's children.

In the scriptures of the New Testament, Jesus refers to God as being the foundation of our being. So, for example, when he is in dialogue with the Sadducees, people who deny the resurrection, he takes people back to a passage of scripture from Exodus, which says, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Jesus remarks that God is not the God of the dead but of the living. The very being and essence of God is the foundation of our own being. And what that being is in its completeness is not yet to be seen. In the resurrection, we have the hope that we will be like him—namely, like the Son of God—because we will see him as he is. So the foundation of who we are comes from the Son, Jesus, this single person, this single person baptized by John.

Now, a sign of all this, a sign that our being has its foundation in God's own Son is the Church itself.

Now, how strange it is that God chooses some very human instruments to reflect foundations. Sometimes, the church looks to be on the point of extinction—hardly something we put our ultimate trust in. And yet, God uses the Church as the sign of the community that He is bringing into being, where there is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, but all are one in Christ Jesus. We find our identity in Christ. But it is shown in the Church; and the Church is to be a sign of the kingdom which God is bringing into existence.

Now, maybe that seems far-fetched. But I remember once preaching a sermon in my previous church in Thorold, to the congregation there, reflecting on the time when our family left a previous church, and I went back to study. We inhabited a semi-detached dwelling in one of the less-desirable areas of London, Ontario—that's what we could afford. And, in order to rent from these people, we had to provide a whole series of references, which is usual, of course. But, from being a minister of a church to seeking rental home seemed a far stretch. I suddenly descended from being "somebody", perhaps, from being "someone", to being "nobody", in the circumstance where I had to prove my identity.

Well, when I mentioned that in this one sermon in Thorold, where we were, the wife of one of the former ministers of that church spoke to me after, and said how much she had identified with what I had said. Mary and Bill Skelly lived in Dunnville, Ontario. He suffered a heart attack not long before he was due to retire. And they moved back to the home they had retained over the years, on Glenridge Avenue in St. Catharines. And the nearest church happened to be one downtown where they went. But it was as though they didn't exist! People paid absolutely no heed to them, whatsoever [at least as Mary expressed it]. They felt that they were not welcomed, really. So they eventually returned to St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, in Thorold, where they became active, and very much part of the congregation there.

So, we may think that the Church is relatively insignificant; or some people may tell us that. But, often, in the actual experience of life, the Church can be an affirmation of who we are as people in the sight of God, can be a reflection of the community which God is bringing into being, ultimately in the kingdom of God.

Now, a further aspect of the foundational quality of what is expressed in this passage from Mark's gospel, which deals with Jesus' baptism—Jesus is named, "You are my Son;" it's also said of him, "You are my Son, the Beloved; in you, I am well-pleased."

Now, as human beings, we think of being "beloved" as being associated—naturally—with certain behaviour, on our part. It happens, of course, that Jesus is the one who lived by faith in his Father; Jesus, the Son of God, lived by faith in the Father. Jesus, also, was given this commission to be a servant of the "many", to be reflective of God's humbling of himself for the sake of the world, the world which God loves.

So Jesus' faith and the service into which Jesus' life was directed is the same sort of faith that he calls us to. In fact, it's by our own faith in Christ that we then attain a life of faith and a life of service of neighbour—all of that by being in union, by faith, in Jesus Christ our Lord.

So that's the basis or foundation of our life. I mentioned that God has included us as his children. Well, God also enables us to *be* his children by awakening in us the spirit of faith in him, through Christ, and the spirit of service of neighbour, as exemplified by Christ.

Now, again, God uses a very human instrument to affirm this foundation that we have in our faith. I have spoken of the Church as being one of the instruments. Well, the Bible itself, and particularly, the gospels themselves, are the instruments which God uses to awaken this faith, and to call us in the way of service of neighbour.

And yet, the Bible is—well, certainly, we read it in Church. It's certainly well-purchased around the world; but not necessarily well-read. The Bible—and, particularly, the gospels have as their goal to awaken faith. Mark's gospel begins, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." And many of the gospels reach their climax—really—in the death of Jesus on the cross. And the death of Jesus on the cross is Jesus' exhibiting to the *n*th degree his faith in the Father; and also dying for the sake for the sins of the world, dying for the world. So the gospels, perhaps more than any other parts of scripture focus on achieving this awakening of faith in those who read, and calling them into the life of service.

And yet, such small works that they are! They can be read in an evening. The whole of Mark's gospel can be read in one sitting. But it's through such means that God calls us into the foundation which is faith and service of neighbour, in union with the very Son of God.

Now, in this passage, it mentions that, "just as Jesus was coming out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart, and the Spirit descending like a dove on him". Thanks to the Son of God, through whom we are incorporated as children of God; thanks to the Son of God, through whom our own faith is awakened, our own service of neighbour encouraged; thanks to the Son of God, we also can share in this Spirit, which was given him.

Now, we live in a world where there is a great deal of emphasis on what is new. And so, the "saint", if you could identify a "secular saint", perhaps the "saint" of the year, was Steve Jobs, who died, and was one of the chief movers of Apple Inc., responsible for all those i-Pads and i-Pods, and other technological wonders. He was responsible for bringing a great deal of new technology to the world—and technology which has been very successful.

However, today's technology becomes defunct in not too long an order. And we are thankful that, through the Spirit of God, we have a reality which always has the capacity to make things "new", make our lives "new". And, in fact, there is the promise that, as this Spirit raised Jesus from the dead; or God, by the Spirit, raised Jesus from the dead, so, by that Spirit, God will give us resurrection-life. So the Spirit is the means whereby God can bring what is new and creative to our own lives and to the world.

And yet again, God uses a very humble reality in order to bring this about—namely, our prayer. By our prayer through Jesus Christ—it's a motivation of the Spirit that achieves that—but it's also thanks to such prayer that the Spirit can come into our lives and transform them for good, and can transform the Christian community of which we are a part, as well.

It may seem odd that God has chosen such unlikely means to be the foundation of life, or to point to the foundation of life—namely, the Church, namely, the scriptures, particularly the gospels, including Mark's gospel; and including our own prayer through Jesus Christ. It seems odd, perhaps, that God chooses such apparently flimsy means. But yet God uses those means; God backs up those means, in order to achieve the ends which he wishes.

And so, I think that the passage is an encouragement to us to hold on to and to affirm and to value the foundation which God brings us, through his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord—namely,

the Church. It's up to us to value and to affirm also the means whereby God wishes to encourage faith in us and in all people—namely, the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and, particularly, the gospels, including the gospel of Mark. And it's up to us, also, to affirm and utilize the means that God has given us in prayer, prayer through Jesus Christ, in order to receive the promise of the Spirit, whom he wishes to give us, in order that he may make all things new.

Thanks be to God that, through his Son, he has provided the foundation for our lives, the foundation of our hope.