

Baptism of the Lord

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Introduction

Though John speaks with the authority of someone powerful who is coming to lead a transformation he does so without authority, with marginal people and in marginal places. And all of this looking remarkably like the epitome of a wild-eyed prophet. And it is to him that Jesus comes to be anointed for service. The community of Jesus continues to defy convention and the comfortable place, all the time eager to hear the voice from heaven.

Text

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, "I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Comment

Early in Year C's consideration of the Gospel of Luke we are pitched into a deeply political world of Emperors and vassals, of intrigue and borders and the lives of those who are of marginal status. It seems that crowds are drawn to this wild bear of a man we know as John the Baptist who, in stark contrast to the managed messaging of today's politics, speaks a message designed to turn people away. (Surely we could lump the naming of the crowd as a 'brood of vipers' alongside Hillary Clinton's now legendary ill-judged 'basket of deplorables' comment in the 2016 US Presidential election.) Yet people keep coming to John.

The powerful get regularly side-swiped by his oratory; Herod is called out on his dubious morals; state officials and military personnel are called to live contrary to the established patterns for their profession. And still the people come. But just as they are considering anointing him he pours on cold water. There is someone even more powerful coming and he describes him in incredibly apocalyptic imagery; fire, winnowing fork, threshing floor, burning chaff, unquenchable fire!

And this is good news! How?

Is it because John, this voice in the wilderness, offers hope to those who are similarly disregarded, similarly marginalised? His preparedness to critique those in power for how they acquired it and how they wield it offers comfort to those who lack the voice or the courage to name the corruption and violence of their times.

But he was not just a prophet of doom, long on analysis but markedly short on action. He urges them to get ready for the change that is coming by producing what he calls 'good fruit,' (3:8–9). Good fruit that comes not from reliance on ethnic or religious purity (3:8), nor financial exploitation (3:12) nor military might (14), not even unquestionable power (3:19–20). But the good fruit of repentance and generosity, of learning to live with sufficient, of non-violence, of justice and kindness.

This is the unquenchable fire that will consume the dross of the world.

Who gave John the authority to baptise? The Temple? The Throne? Other powerful authorities of his day? None of these. It seems that his mission was self-proclaimed and his authority derived from the numbers of those who flocked to him in the wilderness, eager for something new to break into their lives.

And then there is Jesus, the one who presumably carries the winnowing fork of which John spoke, and the flint with which to spark the flame. He submits to baptism in this marginal territory by this marginal, authority-defying character and is thereby purified for his task. Not only that, but a strange voice names his vocation as the Son of God (a name regularly used to describe the King or the Emperor.)

This anointing though, takes place not in the fine places of the palace or religious institutions, but in a river in the desert wilderness. His authority is similarly marginal, though announced by nothing less than a voice from heaven. How astounding that in this curious setting, heaven is ripped open as if God is eager to participate.

And why a dove? Well, it might be because Luke intends us to connect this to the dove in Genesis 8 which presages the promise God makes not to destroy the earth with violence ever again. And maybe it is meant to contrast with the *aquila* (or eagle) which was the standard of some of the Roman legions. A Roman legionnaire was known as an *aquilifer*, or eagle bearer. The standard was a rallying point, but it also served as a representative of all the citizens of Rome and the policies of the Empire.

But in this case it's not a terrifying noble eagle, but a humble, common-or-garden pigeon.

Here now, in front of these marginalised crowds, in this marginalised place, we discern someone who is marked out to sow the seeds of a peaceful revolution, and anointed for leadership in the Peaceable Community. And we see these people, the kindling of their lives sparked by John's message of radical newness, now to be fanned into all-consuming flames, an army more terrifying to the established order than all of Rome's legions.

Response

It is intriguing that all of this significant activity takes place in such marginal locations and such mean instruments. It is in the desert, it is with dirty river water, it is the wild man John, and yet heaven opens in this place.

Though it refers to a different Gospel story I am reminded of Seamus Heaney's poem *The Skylight*. Imagine for a moment what your community's life would be like, however mean it might seem to you today, if the lid came off and something of the extravagance of God's voice entered.

The Skylight

You were the one for skylights. I opposed
Cutting into the seasoned tongue-and-groove
Of pitch pine. I liked it low and closed,
Its claustrophobic, nest-up-in-the-roof
Effect. I liked the snuff-dry feeling,
The perfect, trunk-lid fit of the old ceiling.
Under there, it was all hutch and hatch.
The blue slates kept the heat like midnight thatch.

But when the slates came off, extravagant
Sky entered and held surprise wide open.
For days I felt like an inhabitant
Of that house where the man sick of the palsy
Was lowered through the roof, had his sins forgiven,
Was healed, took up his bed and walked away.

Prayer

God of the marginal places,
you anointed your beloved Son
with the power of the Holy Spirit
to be light for the nations
and release for captives.
Grant that we who are born again
of water and the Spirit
may proclaim with our lips
the good news of his peace
and show forth in our lives
the victory of his justice.
We make our prayer through Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
God for ever and ever. Amen.

