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By Pat Bennett

Introduction

Today's Gospel reading contains some striking tensions as well as some startling and possibly unexpected images. The baptism of Jesus is, like the visit of the Magi, an occasion of theophany – a moment when God reveals himself in some way. Although Jesus is the ultimate culmination of all theophanies – God incarnate in human flesh – this was not immediately and everywhere apparent and thus one of the functions of the Gospel narratives is to show, in different ways, how this becomes evident through his words and actions and in various events in his life. There have already been a number of these 'unveiling' moments – to the shepherds who attended his birth; to Simeon and Anna in the temple, and to the visiting Magi from the East. The moment of baptism becomes the first such occasion in the life of the adult Jesus – and one moreover of a very particular kind. However once again the revelation is not apparent to all and hence once again we encounter the hidden/revealed motif which we began to explore last week – in fact it plays a part in each of the three distinct phases of the text.

Preparation: Find a number of different pictures or other representations of the Baptism of Jesus (try and include the one by Piero della Francesca) and spend some time looking at them. Read the accounts of the story in the 3 Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 3: 13-17; Mark 1: 9-11; Luke 3: 21-23) and then go back to the pictures again. Do they expand or deepen your understanding of the texts in any way? Do they raise any angles which the stories don't seem to cover or questions which they don't address?

Text

Mark 1:9-15

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.

And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news."

Comment

Today's reading is only short but it contains three distinct (though intimately related) episodes. In the first Jesus undergoes baptism at the hands of John; in the second he spends time in the wilderness, and in the third he takes over the mantle of John and begins to announce the arrival of the Kingdom of God (albeit with different terminology and emphases from the Baptist). Each episode is also a stage on the way in the theophanic journey of Jesus as he tests, tempers, and finally fully assumes the revelatory role for which he has come into the world.

Depictions of the baptism of Jesus in classical art rarely convey the barely suppressed energy and almost violent imagery of Mark's account: Jesus usually stands calmly or passively in the water while John stretches out an arm over him and a dove hangs serenely above, lit with warm light – Piero's painting is a case in point. However the language employed by Mark belies the routine tranquility of these pictures – the descent of the dove, irrespective of the gentleness or otherwise of this, is preceded by a violent convulsion in the heavens which are 'torn apart' – the phrase could equally be translated 'rent/cloven asunder' (and it is mirrored by the rending in two – the same word is used – of the veil in the temple at the end point of Jesus' public ministry). This is an absolutely momentous event in the life of Jesus – a moment of passage from one phase of understanding and action to another and more perilous one. The sense of this is heightened by the fact that here, for the first time, the theophanic moment explicitly involves all the members of the Trinity: Jesus waits, God speaks, and the Holy Spirit descends.

Piero's painting, its tranquility notwithstanding, captures something of this moment of transition: the water in which Christ stands has ceased to flow and whilst behind him we can see limpid water reflecting the landscape and the colourful robes of the figures in the middle ground, ahead of him there is only a pathway of bare dried mud. In part this is Piero's indication of the theophanic nature of the moment – his image of the halted water and the dry river bed summons up various Old Testament stories (e.g. Exodus 14: 21; Joshua 3: 13–17; 2 Kings 2:8, 13) where the halting of sea or river are indications of God's presence and power. However there is also a suggestion, in the bare earth in front of Jesus (and its contrast to the lush surroundings) which hints at what is to come in the next part of the story after this threshold event.

It is not clear, from Mark's account at least, what effect this moment had on any who witnessed it – including Jesus himself. We might perhaps wonder, especially looking at his pensive, pre-occupied face in Piero's painting, whether this was a moment of unfolding revelation for him also – if not about the nature of his true identity, then at least about the consequences of this for his life from that moment on.

What Mark does tell us is that there was no time for quiet reflection or staying in the moment. Once again the language he uses is energetic and forceful – 'immediately the spirit drove him', and here the sense is of being cast out or expelled. Jesus is compelled to go out into the wilderness and test his sense of vocation against what he finds there. Mark is sparse in his details but we know that Jesus has encounters of three different kinds – with Satan, the beasts, and the angels, and we might reasonably surmise that each experience makes its own particular contribution to his journey of understanding.

With respect to the first, Mark does not go into the specific detail of Matthew and Luke, simply telling us that Jesus was tempted. The stories of the two former often encourage us to see the temptations of Jesus primarily in terms of a test of his faith and virtue in resisting various enticements to sin. However the Greek gives us another possible dimension to such testing whereby the proings of Satan allow Jesus to test and temper his own understandings about his identity, and about the task entrusted to him as a consequence of this.

The second encounter mentioned is with the beasts, and it is here that we discover something surprising in the text. The desert to which Jesus was sent would have been home to bears, boars and jackals amongst other things and generally we take 'the beasts' to be an ingredient which added to the potential terror of Jesus' wilderness experience. However the Greek indicates that, far from being a threat to Jesus, they were in fact his companions – they were 'with' him and he was 'among'

them in the same way that he was later to be with and among his disciples (the etymological relationship between companionship and bread might add another lovely dimension to this aspect as well).

Finally we come to the angels who 'waited on him'. We can have no way of knowing what form this took but it is reasonable to infer that it involved comfort, support and encouragement of some kind. So what we have is Jesus being given space and opportunity in different ways to stretch and test his understandings and strength, and gain experiences which will then help inform his own interactions with others. This evolving knowledge is an important preliminary to the making known of God and his Kingdom which will henceforth be the hallmark of his ministry.

In the final sequence of the story we begin to see the consequences of the two preceding experiences: Jesus, publicly called, and having had chance to test and refine his responses away from other eyes, now returns to the public arena to set in motion the ultimate unveiling of God to which his life will now be dedicated.

The example of Jesus in these three vignettes can offer us some guidance in our Lenten 'life audit' as it bears on our understandings of conflict and our responses to it. In order to know how to act intentionally rather than simply be swept along by emotions or events, we need to have a sense of who we are, and of what values are important shapers and directors of the life we aspire to lead. Our life experiences provide much of the raw data for this but the insights are only gained through processes of reflection and questioning which allow us to explore and refine our understandings and responses. Sometimes this may require us to go to uncomfortable places, but as we undertake the journey, not only will our motivations become clearer to us, enabling us to adjust them as needed, but also we might find that we develop the confidence to be more honest with others about the hopes and fears which drive our actions – something which might in turn open up possibilities for different and more constructive interactions.

Response

Choose your favourite from the baptism pictures and put it somewhere you can see it. Take a number of occasions during the course of Lent to spend some time with the picture, letting it remind you of this story and form a starting point from which to reflect on your own understandings about yourself, of how you want to live, and of what might hinder or help you in pursuit of this goal.

Prayer

Confession

God of the liminal places

you draw us into the quiet of the desert

so that we can encounter ourselves...

But we confess that all too often

we stubbornly cling to false images

rather than face the necessity of change.

silence/kyrie

You call us into the emptiness of the desert

so that we can confront our desires ...

But we confess that all too often

we continue to choose our own comfort

rather than serving the needs of others.

silence/kyrie

You drive us into the dangers of the desert

so that we can engage with your Kingdom ...

But we confess that all too often

we prefer the smooth roads of safety

over the perilous pathways of justice.

silence/kyrie

Forgive us, O God,

wherever we have chosen to be, or do, or dare

less than you have asked of us;

and as we walk on in the desert with you

help us watch and wrestle with these things

so that we might choose differently in future.

Amen

(Prayer © P Bennett. Taken from 'Walking the Wilderness – A Communion Liturgy for the Season of Lent'; published by Wild Goose Publications www.ionabooks.com and used with permission)