

Sermon

Sunday 12th Jan 2020. 1st Sunday of Epiphany. The Baptism of Christ. Gospel
Reading: Matthew 3:13-17.

Title: The Importance of Becoming

In 1962 the American writer Henry Miller published a collection of stories and essays entitled 'Stand Still Like the Hummingbird'. In the final essay, that bears the same title as the book, he declared that 'Language at best is but a poor means of communication; it is the soul speaking to the soul, the spirit informing speech, which gives words meaning'¹. This is a sentiment I agree with as, more often than not, we don't stop to think about the language we use, the words we speak, or hear, or read, nor do we stop to consider the meaning they convey. We often read or hear something and think we know what it says or means without actually taking the time to reflect on its significance; we singularly fail to listen for 'the soul speaking to the soul' and, as a consequence, we often fail to understand the meaning in the words. This holds true for all writing, including scripture. In our Christian calendar, today marks the feast of the Baptism of Christ, and the accounts of his baptism in the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) are good examples of the point I'm making. We have three different narrative accounts of the baptism, and it's the language used within these accounts that give us clues to the nature of the event itself. I'd like to start by focusing on some small, seemingly insignificant words, which can have such a profound impact on our understanding of what happened.

¹ Miller, H (1962) 'Stand Still Like the Hummingbird'. New York: New Directions, p.188.

In Matthew's account we are told that '...when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to **him** and **he** saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, '**This** is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'² Now here we have a somewhat conflicting account of what happened. On the one hand we have the heavens being opened to **him** (i.e. Jesus), and then we have a voice saying '**This** is my Son', suggesting a collective experience that others would have shared. In contrast, the whole narrative in the earlier account by Mark is written from the personal perspective of Jesus; it's written as if describing his subjective experience; so Mark's account says '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"³.

Now, why is this important, why am I labouring over seemingly minor grammatical variations in the narrative? Well, the difference, of course, is in who had the experience. In Matthew's account there is a strong suggestion that this was, at least in part, a shared experience. If we had been there as observers we would all have heard a voice from heaven saying to us "**this** is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased". But in Mark's account these events are described as the subjective experience of Jesus. The heavens being torn apart, the descending of the Spirit like a dove, and God's voice declaring Jesus to be His son were not shared experiences but a deeply profound, transcendent, life changing, personal encounter lived through by Jesus himself. This was his personal epiphany, his personal

² Matthew 3:16-17 (NRSV)

³ Mark 1:10-11 (NRSV)

awakening, his transformational moment when he realised his oneness of being with the infinite nature of God.

It is through his baptism, that Jesus expresses his solidarity with us, his oneness with us. It is through his baptism that he asserts the fullness of his humanity. But equally, his baptism is the moment at which the Christ light fully emerges into the temporal world and marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. It is this defining and transcendent moment that affirms for him his divinity, his true identity as the Son of God. But, as Paul explains in his letter to the Romans, by 'the spirit of God affirming to our spirit that we are all God's children'⁴, this revelation of his true identity also reveals our own; we are all sons and daughters of God. Each of us, just as Jesus did, can come to the awareness of our own divine nature, our own interconnectedness with God and with all creation. Just as Jesus heard this affirmation from God, we are each created to hear God's call and to feel His spirit touch our own lives.

The German Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that 'the vocation of every person is to discover who we really are'⁵. At his baptism, Jesus discovered, in the very depth of his being, who he really was. The intimate inner encounter that Jesus had must also lead us within, it invites us towards inwardness where, as Peter Traben Haas describes, we will meet 'the presence of love that

⁴ Romans 8:16, The Revised English Bible.

⁵ In: Keller, D. G. R. (2007) Reading Living Water: The Integral Place of Contemplative Prayer in Christian Transformation. *Sewanee Theological Review*, 50:3 Pentecost 2007, p.409-426.

births wisdom, kindness, mercy and understanding'⁶. It is here, resting in the silent presence of love, where we too will discover who we really are, God's beloved with whom, because of his boundless, infinite and unconditional love, he is well pleased. We must not be content with just believing, we must also realise the importance of becoming, becoming who we really are. We must move from being a people who passively assent and observe to being active practicing participants, grounding our life in spiritual practices that can enable us, as we're told in the letter of Paul to the Romans, to 'be transformed by the renewing of (our) minds'⁷. We must work, to paraphrase Galatians, so that Christ is formed within us⁸. Baptism is the gateway, it marks the beginning of our journey of becoming, 'a journey into the sacred nature of love'⁹, a journey that we'll be on for the rest of our lives.

The baptismal water is the water of transformation that cleanses, liberates and renews. It brings us to new life just as it bestowed new life to Jesus. Jesus is transformed at his baptism and we are invited to commit to our own transformation. At his baptism, he became utterly open to the awe and wonder of life, and to his oneness with the source of life itself. Likewise, each of us can journey on the path of transformation into the light of Christ, into the presence of God within ourselves, and realise our reciprocal connection with the source of creation; the realisation that 'we flow into God and God into us'¹⁰.

⁶ Traben Hass, P (2018) Contemplative Church. Austin, TX; ContemplativeChristians.com, p.66.

⁷ Romans 12:2 (NRSV)

⁸ Paraphrase of Galatians 4:19

⁹ McColman, C (2010) The Big Book of Christian Mysticism: The Essential Guide to Contemplative Spirituality. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company, p.72

¹⁰ Bourgeault, C (2008) The Wisdom Jesus. Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., p.31

It seems fitting to end with Malcolm Guite's sonnet entitled 'The Baptism of Christ'...

Beginning here we glimpse the Three-in-one;

The river runs, the clouds are torn apart,

The Father speaks, the Spirit and the Son

Reveal to us the single loving heart

That beats behind the being of all things

And calls and keeps and kindles us to light.

The dove descends, the spirit soars and sings

'You are beloved, you are my delight!'

In that swift light and life, as water spills

And streams around the Man like quickening rain,

The voice that made the universe reveals

The God in Man who makes it new again.

He calls us too, to step into that river,

To die and rise and live and love forever¹¹.

Amen.

¹¹ Guite, M. (2012) *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*. Norwich, Canterbury Press, p.20.