

Baptism of the Lord: Mark 1:4-11

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Baptism and the Prayer of Unveiling

*'And in those days it happened that Jesus, from Nazareth of Galilee, came and was baptised in the Jordan by John. And, immediately rising up out of the water, he saw the heavens being rent apart and the Spirit descending to him as a dove; And a voice out of the heavens: "You are my Son, the beloved, in you I have delighted"*

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In recent years it has been family practice to take a bit of leave in December/January, mainly because I am at Rottneest doing the Christmas services, so it's convenient to stay on for some relaxing time. I don't know how you find it when you go on holidays – whether it takes you some time to start to unwind, to get out of the regular mode of life and to ease into a different way of being, which is less activist. Often I find myself very restless in those first few days – agitated – it's like my body does not know how to adapt to just BEING rather than DOING stuff.

So, here I am at Rottneest Island, hangin' out and surrounded by paradise, not having to DO anything and finding myself anxious about all the things I'm NOT doing. Where does all this come from?

Maybe, somewhere along the line, maybe before we can even remember, someone gave us the message that we were only valuable if we were performing, or doing something valuable. It would not have been couched like that of course. It would have been picked up more subtly, as our parents rewarded us with little comments, like 'Good Boy...Good girl...well done' when we DID the right thing, or 'BAD boy, BAD girl' if we didn't.

Deep down in the psyche a lot of our activism is really about seeking the love and approval of a parent. The deep desire of our hearts is to be OK – to feel loved – to feel like we belong. It's like a big black hole constantly wanting to be filled. And if that kind of rewards and punishments thinking gets transferred onto God, then God just becomes the mega parent in the sky, who we are constantly trying to please.

It is therefore both encouraging and startling that Mark's gospel deal with this right at the very beginning of his gospel – right there just a few verses in. Right there, right at the very beginning, Jesus gets this wonderful and unconditional validation as being loved. And guess what, according to the story, his ministry has not even started yet. He hasn't DONE anything of particular note, when the voice of the Father from heaven says, 'you are my Son (my child), the beloved, with you I am well pleased'.

And this comes to Jesus as an APOCALYPSE – a REVELATION. This is the core apocalypse of the gospel – we are God's beloved children – adopted in the family of the Kingdom of God (Romans 8:14-17). Yes, by all means, it's a good thing to confess our sins as John called people out to do in the River Jordan. Yes – a spring clean of the dirty laundry from the cupboards – a good cleaning confession is a great clearing of junk. But we need to remember that God doesn't love us because we confess. We confess because God loves us. The value of the confession – cleaning out the cupboards of junk simply creates a space into which the Spirit of God can come pouring in. But very often the Spirit of God comes pouring in anyway – and just when least expected, just like for St Paul on the road to Damascus.

At Rottneest Island there is a beautiful swimming bay called The Basin. People flock to it because it is a safe place to swim. They are OK. They splash in the water. They are held just as they are. They are not in performance mode. They are in BEING mode. In my imagination, that is where John the Baptist would be baptising Jesus – the Basin – a large baptismal basin. In this baptismal basin God unveils something for Jesus. And that unveiling is for all of us as we hear that we are beloved children of God. Then we begin to unpack the meaning and significance of that for our lives.

In his first reflection for 2021, Richard Rohr at the Centre for Action and Contemplation wrote the following words, which seem appropriate as we begin another year of praying together, so I will finish with this...

*“When we celebrate the beginning of a new year, we celebrate the rebirth of time. We wait for God to do new things. We wait for who we are. We wait for the coming of grace, for the revelation of God....”*

*Contemplative prayer is a form of unveiling, because it reveals what is going on beneath the polished and busy surfaces of our minds, our hearts, and our bodies. When we finally get still enough, contemplation can live within us in pure, open moments of right here, right now. This is enough, this is fullness. If it is not right here, right now, it doesn't exist. If we don't know God now, how would we know God later? The mystics say we won't. We will not recognize God later if we cannot recognize God now. It is a matter of seeing God now through the shadow and the disguise.*

*Contemplative prayer lives in a spacious place, free of personal needs or meanings or even interpretations. Life does not care what I like or don't like. It doesn't matter a bit. If we stay in the world of preference, we keep ourselves as the reference point. Does it really matter what color I like best or what my current favorite movie is? It changes from moment to moment. No wonder people have identity crises. No wonder people have a fragile self-image; they have nothing solid to build on beyond changing opinions and feelings. If formerly we said, “I think therefore I am,” now it might be “I choose therefore I am.” That's not a solid foundation to build on.*

*The real question is “What does this have to say to me?” Those who are totally converted come to every experience and ask not whether or not they liked it, but what does it have to teach them. “What's the message or gift in this for me? How is God in this event? Where is God in this suffering?” This is a prayer of unveiling, asking that the cruciform shape of reality be revealed to us within the very shape and circumstances of our own lives” (4 Jan 2021 Richard Rohr)*

