
⁴ John appeared, baptising in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ... ⁹ In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰ And when He came up out of the water, immediately He saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on Him like a dove. ¹¹ And a voice came from heaven, “You are My beloved Son; with You I am well pleased.” From Mark 1:4-11 (ESV)

Some time ago a movie was released that reflected on the theme of “What if you could go back and change the past in your life?” Indeed, there have been many movies made on this theme, but this particular movie is “The Butterfly Effect” (featuring Ashton Kutcher – also not suitable for young viewers). The premise of the movie was that the lead character (Evan) can travel back in time and redo parts of his past when he reads from his adolescent journals, He wants to travel back in time to deal with significant negative and violent experiences that he and his friends had shared. However, there are consequences to his revised choices that dramatically alter his present life. Eventually, he realises that, even though his intentions to fix the past are good, his actions have unforeseen consequences, in which either he or at least one of his friends suffers horribly. And a fascinating thing about this movie is that depending on which version you see, there are any of 4 possible different endings.

If you could go back into the past and change some things, what would you like to change? If we spend some time on this question, most people could reflect on things that have happened to them, or things they have seen happen to others (and perhaps where they either acted in a wrong way, or failed to act in a way of caring for others), and think about the way they would like things to be different. But as the movie “The Butterfly Effect” suggests, to change the past is to change the present.

You are who you are because of the experiences you have had in life. It doesn't make certain things ‘right’ or ‘acceptable’ or ‘good’. And for many people, the events of the past still have on-going effects in the present life. But you cannot ‘change’ the ‘past’. Instead, we are called to accept with it, and deal with it, and respond in appropriate ways. But that doesn't change the fact that sometimes we wouldn't mind being able to ‘change things’, to have a ‘do over’. Whether it is a day or a decade there are times when we wish we could back up and do things differently: choose different words to speak; act in a differently way; handle a relationship better. Sometimes we just want to do life differently. And maybe the wishing can go deeper than just doing differently. Maybe a person may want to be different in their soul. Our doing arises out of and reveals our being, who we are, how we see ourselves, one another, and the world.

In our Holy Gospel for this day (Mark 1:4-11) we hear of many people coming to John the Baptist and seeking a sort of ‘do-over’. We hear that John ‘appeared’ in ‘the wilderness’ and ‘proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins’.

There is so much one could reflect on here in this account in the Gospel according to Saint Mark. John 'appeared'. Mark's Gospel account does not have any form of account of the birth of Jesus. It simply begins with (Mark 1:1-3): *The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, "Behold, I send My messenger before Your face, who will prepare Your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make His paths straight,'"* And 'suddenly' John 'appears'. It is like a dramatic new beginning.

We note first that John is 'in the wilderness'. For people of Bible times 'the wilderness' represents a place of spiritual reflection (think of the many Biblical people who go 'away from people' to be close' to God: eg: Moses, Elijah, Jesus). 'The wilderness' also is the place where the people of old travelled through for 40 years to enter 'the promised land'. 'Wilderness' is a place where so many 'new beginnings' have emerged.

Then there is the 'proclamation' of a 'baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. There are two things we may note in relation to this. First, the people left their towns and homes and enter into the wilderness in order to experience change. And this wasn't like people from southern states wanting to move to Queensland to escape COVID restrictions. It wasn't a lifestyle change they were seeking. It was about a 'life change' (as highlighted in Luke 3:1-14, where we hear, *"The crowds began to ask him, "What should we do then?" He answered them, "Whoever has two shirts should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do the same." Tax collectors also came to be baptised. They said, "Teacher, what should we do?" To them he said, "Collect no more than what you were authorised to." Soldiers were also asking him, "And what should we do?" He told them, "Do not extort money from anyone by force or false accusation. Be satisfied with your wages."*)

This 'proclamation of a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins' is about change in people's lives.

William Barclay, when reflecting on this in his 'Daily Study Bible Commentary' says that this 'change' involves a 'change' in 'three directions. First, there is a 'change' within oneself, as a person admits their wrong-doing to themselves. The reality is that we do not want to really admit to our own sins. But this 'change' will also involve confession to God. And of this Barclay also says, *"It is not the person who desires to meet God on equal terms who will discover forgiveness, but the person who kneels in humble contrition and whispers through their shame, "God be merciful to me a sinner."* And, of course, this 'change' (this confession) will also involve appropriate confession to anyone who has been wronged. But sometimes this is difficult. If the person who has been wronged is dead, we cannot confess to them. The person who has been wronged may not want to hear your confession (and sometimes for very valid reasons which need to be respected). But, as the Bible says (Romans 12:18), *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."*

But there comes a point in every person's life when we begin to realise that some 'change' is beyond our own 'selves' and our own 'resources'. A person may say to themselves (and perhaps even to others), "I'm OK." But who of us here can

'change' death? Who here can really 'undo' the wrongs of their past, and the 'wrongs' other have committed?

And so, as John is "*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins*", in those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And there is so much we could reflect on here...

We may ask the question why Jesus was baptised if He was indeed the 'sinless one'. Of course, we know the answer to this question is that Jesus came to be baptised not because He needed to confess sins, but in order to identify with us who are sinners. This is God 'being one' with us. This is the beginning of Jesus 'public ministry'

We may then also reflect on the incredible description of events that followed. Mark says that 'the heavens were torn open'. We may wonder what this meant to those who were there on that day. What did they actually see? What did they actually hear? What is fascinating is that this word for 'torn' (*schizdo* in the Greek) is only used at one other point in Mark's Gospel – the tearing of the Temple curtain at Jesus' death (Mark 15:38).

And then there is 'the Spirit' who 'enters into Jesus, and the 'voice from heaven' which points to the divine origins of Jesus (cf. Psalm 2:7; Isaiah 42:1).

And all this (another point of reflection) highlights the work of the Triune God in our salvation.

This text is about new beginnings. Mark writes of Jesus' baptism under the rubric of the "beginning" of the gospel of Jesus Christ (1:1). This word recalls Genesis 1:1-5, the Old Testament lesson for the day. "In the beginning," God's Spirit once hovered over the waters, while God spoke and called heaven and earth into being. So also at the baptism of Jesus, God's Spirit came over the waters and His voice declared Jesus to be His Son. That was the beginning of a whole new creation (see also 2 Corinthians 5:17; Revelation 21:5). Through Jesus' death and resurrection, which his baptism foreshadows, the new creation is fulfilled. For us, we are baptised into Christ, and we all share in the new creation that Christ brings. Through baptism, we have all been reborn. In Christ, and in our daily return to our own baptisms, there is an inexhaustible source for the renewal and new beginnings of our lives (Titus 3:5).

The Danish Lutheran philosopher Søren Kierkegaard had an interesting reflection on baptism in which we often may miss the point of what is really going on. Kierkegaard notes that in his time "A silken priest with an elegant gesture sprinkles water three times on the dear little baby and dries his hands gracefully with a towel" and then contrasts this to the roughly dressed and strongly spoken and wild eyed, John the Baptist grasping his intended subject on the head and pushing them under the surface of a weedy and dirty river. It has been pondered by some that today baptism may represent a gentle acknowledgement of a family's position in the church, but in Jesus' time it was a radical to a serious mission. This is not to decry what Baptism has become, but rather a call for each of us to take that call at our Baptism most seriously, as indeed, Jesus' baptism was serious business for Him, and for us.

As we listened to today's Gospel, we once again heard about John the Baptist. We heard that he was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Did you hear those words? John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. We tend to think of repentance as feeling guilty about our sins, but it is more—much more. The Greek word, *metanoia*, means a change of mind or direction. It is related to the Hebrew word *tesubah*, used by prophets to call Israel to abandon its sinful ways and to return to God. Both words (*metanoia* and *tesubah*) imply “a total change of spiritual direction”

Jesus has made His Baptism our baptism. And here Jesus ‘changes things’ for us...

Things are not always as they seem. It's true for us, and it is especially true for Jesus. Consider that just two weeks ago, we celebrated Christmas. Here Jesus looked like any other baby. But things aren't always what they seem. Our confession of faith here is that the infinite God has come to us as a little Child; That's something that seems impossible. I mean, really...God: a Child?!. That's why also last week we remembered the Magi making their big trip (Matthew 2:1-11). Their eyes perceived an ordinary toddler. But by God's grace they knew Him to be the LORD's Christ. It must've looked crazy. Important men from a foreign land, on their faces worshipping a poor, dirty, Child. But things aren't always what they seem.

Things are not always as they seem. Likewise this morning: Jesus does not look mightier than John, His older cousin. By all observations, He has been rather quiet up until now. But by submitting to John's baptism, Jesus publicly begins that journey of salvation for us.

Things aren't always what they seem. Our world is full of examples that make that point. Someone who appears to be healthy may actually be quite ill; a successful hedge fund may actually be a Ponzi scheme; an outwardly happy marriage may be full of animosity and fear. The list goes on and on, and you can add to it many examples of your own. But Jesus' baptism in the Jordan is for you. Jesus goes into the water this because things aren't what they seem. And the Baptism of Jesus reveals the plan of God to change things.

Today we celebrate the greatest baptism birthday of all, the Baptism of Our Lord. It is His baptism that gives us life. By His baptism, by His death on the cross, and by His glorious resurrection from the dead, Christ our Lord has changed everything. And so we may remember what God has done in our baptism: He joined you to Jesus forever, He made you His own dear child, and He gave you the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever your life has been or might now be, the baptismal waters await you. So return to the water. Remember your Baptism and let the waters of God's life wash you, and rid you of fear and resentment and despair. Immerse yourself in the water of God's love. Splash in the waves of God's forgiveness. Swim in the pool of God's grace. Dive deep into the gift of having been created in the image and likeness of God. Drift in the stillness of God's peace. These are the waters of new birth. Here God gives us true power to walk in ‘newness of life’. Let us live in the light of heaven opened to us, now and always. Amen.