

Title: "A Commitment Sealed: Baptism in Mark 1:4-11"

Introduction:

+ As Christmas has drawn to a close, with what felt like a tranquil twelfth night, the gospel immediately returns to the narrative of Jesus. A sacred and transformative moment in the life of our Saviour – his baptism in the Jordan River begins Jesus' story in the Gospel of Mark. This moment unveils the profound significance of baptism and the unwavering commitment it symbolises. As we delve into this passage, let us open our hearts to the transformative power of baptism and the commitment it calls us to make.

I. Preparing the Way (Mark 1:4-5):

John the Baptist emerges on the scene, the prophetic voice crying out in the wilderness, as foretold in Isaiah and as we heard at the beginning of Advent. John was calling people to repent and baptise them in the Jordan River. Baptism becomes a powerful symbol of repentance – a turning away from the old self and a commitment to a new way of life. Further to this, it was on the Palestinian side of the river. Having been immersed in the river, the journey continued with a symbolic enacting of entering the land of promise. It was an opportunity to be again. In our lives, we are also mindful of the need for repentance, acknowledging our shortcomings and turning to God with contrite hearts.

II. The Baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9-11):

In verses 9 to 11, we witness Jesus coming to be baptised by John. Though sinless, Jesus willingly enters the waters, identifying with humanity in every way. As He emerges from the water, the heavens are torn open. The Spirit descends upon Him like a dove while a voice from heaven declares, "You are my beloved Son; with you, I am well pleased."

In our baptism, this is affirmed within us. Whilst we may not recall our baptism, we do annually, at Easter, make a reaffirmation of our baptismal and confirmation commitment. It is a call to newness of life. In making that affirmation, we are challenged to let the past go, make amends, and live our lives devoted not only to Jesus but also to be enactors of the Word made flesh in our family and community life.

It is a commitment to live out our faith. It is not made in isolation but is a public moment of promise. It is a moment where, after receiving the inward grace of baptism, we are called to share what the Lord requires through thought, words, and deeds. We may not have that symbolic moment of heaven being rendered over, but in the community of Christ where we are baptised, others present, as the Body of Christ, 'receive and welcome you.' It is a public ministry to which we are made part.

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of His public ministry. In this moment, we find the perfect model for our commitment to God. Baptism is not a ritual but a powerful declaration of our identity as beloved children of God. As Jesus found affirmation and purpose in His baptism, we find our true identity and purpose in Christ.

III. The Transformative Power of Baptism:

Baptism is more than a symbolic act; it is a sacrament that signifies our union with Christ in His death and resurrection. As we are buried with Him in the waters of baptism, we rise to newness of life (Romans 6:4). The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.

This transformative power calls us to live differently – to embrace God's kingdom's values, love our neighbours, and seek justice and mercy. Baptism is not the end but the beginning of a journey of discipleship, a commitment to follow Christ and allow His Spirit to work within us.

IV. A Call to Ongoing Commitment:

The voice from heaven affirmed Jesus, as God affirms each of us in our baptism. We are God's beloved sons and daughters, and our commitment to Him is sealed in baptism. However, this commitment is not a one-time event but a lifelong journey.

It may sound vague to make this one statement. Still, in the formal baptismal blessing used at baptisms and confirmations, there is that direct us into holy and godly living. There is no political

or social agenda in what we are told to do, but a determined and well-outlined commission of what it means to live our lives following Christ.

On the slide, I have highlighted the directions that are given. Each of them reflects not only the teaching of Jesus but also the law and prophets on which Jesus' commands all rely.

Go forth into the world in peace;

We are told to GO into the world peacefully. This command is essential in terms of what is required. Whilst baptism is membership of the Church militant, actions are required of us. The first is in apostolic tradition to not stay in this place but allow the peace of God that passes all understanding to be the beginning point of our journey.

Be of good courage.

Courage is more than a state of mind; it is a state of the heart. "Take heart, do not be afraid; it is I", we are told. Courage enables us to interact with the wider world and all the presentations of evil we may face. Good courage is that which recognises the inherent positive desire that God has for all people. Sometimes, we are confronted with a different situation and may need to make choices.

Hold fast, which is good.

This is where the courage to make a decision is made. We are not to be afraid to make a call based on our conviction of being in the right relationship with Jesus. The following clause illustrates that we must rise above the temptation to strike back in what we do. "Turn the other cheek," says Jesus. "Do not give a scorpion instead of an egg" is another command of Jesus. Render to no one evil for evil.

Strengthening the faint-hearted reminds us that not all will face the world with good courage. There is a word here that is obvious in terms of how we are to live. Encourage.

Support the weak; help the afflicted.

We may judge based on the situation we find others in, but the reality for us is to be doers of the Word. We are to be good Samaritans. We are to be the faithful and loving father who forgave his wayward son. We are to be Christlike in looking at the one who knows what is required but lacks the courage to let go of status and perceived richness. In loving the other, the following clause makes sense: give honour to all.

In these ways, we love and serve the Lord. Each week, like apostles, we are sent. We are not to stay. We are back at the beginning but with one other thing: a constant and ever-present helper, advocate, and guide. We are in the presence of the Holy Spirit, in whom we are called to rejoice and allow that power and grace to motivate all we do.

This is what it means to be committed and living the faith. The Word made flesh, the incarnate presence of God, has come into the world, not to call the righteous, but to speak with all of us who, from time to time, separate ourselves from the love of God, Christ Jesus, and our neighbours. It is the Holy Spirit who guides and strengthens us. The Holy Spirit gives us the wisdom and courage to make a difference.

Daily, we are called to renew our commitment to follow Christ, seeking His guidance and allowing His Spirit to shape our lives. In our baptism covenant, we are constantly reminded of the grace bestowed upon us and the responsibility to live as children of the light.

Conclusion:

As we reflect on the baptism of Jesus in Mark 1:4-11, let us be inspired to renew our commitment to God. May we embrace the transformative power of baptism, allowing it to shape our identity, guide our actions, and propel us on the journey of discipleship. May the Spirit of God descend upon us like a dove, empowering us to live out our commitment as beloved children of the Most High. Amen.