

Standing on the threshold
Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

9 January 2022

Well, whether we have made formal New Year's resolutions or not, the turn of the year is always a time of assessments, a kind of cross roads. It is a time of looking back at where we have been and perhaps making plans about where we would like to be in the coming year. It happens in our personal lives as well as in our church life and in society as a whole. The Queen in her Christmas message has looked back and talked movingly about the loss of her husband, Prince Philip last year. But she also drew us into her expectation of celebrating her Platinum Jubilee as a reigning monarch in 2022.

We are all standing on a kind of threshold and here in church we have just left the baby Jesus in the manger surrounded by shepherds and wise men, and we are now suddenly encountering him as a 30 year old adult standing on his own threshold of life. On this second Sunday of Epiphany the Lectionary gives us the story of Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist in the river Jordan as recorded by Luke's gospel. We know this story so well, I am sure most of us could recite it by heart. But, the point about the Bible is that however well we think we know it, we can always be surprised by something we have not noticed before.

This time my big surprise was the discovery of just how radical these two men of God, John and Jesus were. Why would they call John, the Baptizer? If it had been an everyday event that people baptized each other, then there was nothing special about John. But the fact is, he was an innovator. He has actually, invented baptism as we know it. Immersion in water was widely used before. It was for restoring ritual purity, which enabled people to come into God's presence. But, it was self-administered meaning that you immersed yourself and washed yourself in water in the specially made pools and baths erected in the vicinity of the Temple. It was also something that had to be repeated every time the individual's impurity would have excluded them from Temple worship.

Then along came John and started to call people to repent of their sins and not only cleanse themselves outwardly, but make a once and for all change of their lives. With full God-given, prophetic authority he took it upon himself to perform this new kind of – once

and for all - immersion signifying repentance and God's forgiveness. He had used an old tradition and filled it with new meaning according to the needs of his own generation. It seems he despaired at the state of people's religiosity whose acts of worship became such routine that it stopped making a difference to their ordinary life once they left the sacred courts of the Temple.

Standing on the threshold of the New Year we may want to look back and see how our acts of worship have affected our everyday life in the past year. We were full of good intentions when the pandemic first hit our shores. In spite of the restrictions we have found ways of looking after each other. We have tried to keep up our support for those who led the fight against the disease and maintain our concern for the weakest of society. Are we still there, or have we become tired of it all? Is there something we are called to do differently in 2022?

Well, whatever happened in his first 30 years, now we find Jesus standing by the river Jordan facing the biggest change of his life. The radical nature of his appearance there hit me, when I read the words 'during a *general* baptism of the people' he too came to be baptized. The word 'general' has the connotation of 'common', 'ordinary', 'widespread', 'everyday'. With hindsight, these are not the characteristics we would associate with Jesus. Even on the human level, we hold him unique, the most special of all human beings, quite the opposite of common or ordinary. And here he is just stepping into the public arena with a burning sense of an urgent mission to the people of Israel. So, what is he doing with this wild, breakaway prophet, off the beaten track milling around with an unsavoury crowd of tax collectors and soldiers and sinners of every kind? Shouldn't he present himself at some holy place, like the Temple and declare his message to those fit to hear the word of God?

By today, of course, the rite of baptism has travelled a long way since its first introduction by John the Baptist. From a sign of repentance and forgiveness of sins, first it had become an initiation sign for entry into the faith within the early Christian communities. In a later development, when infant baptism became widespread, it also became the occasion for naming the newborn babies. Although all this was still in the future at that riverside baptism, yet in a curious way, that also turned out to be a naming event. The people seeking John's baptism heard themselves called 'brood of vipers' unless they

repented and mended their ways. John himself was tentatively called the 'Messiah', which he strongly rejected. And then there was Jesus, who took his turn in going under with the others, hearing himself called God's beloved. Same event, many different experiences!

However special, or unique or different Jesus may have felt from the others, he chose to seek God's presence in the company of ordinary, common people during a 'general' event. It was there, among those people called 'brood of vipers' that God's personal word came to him. 'You are my beloved son. In you I delight' - the gracious words echoing Isaiah's beautiful message: 'I call you by name, you are mine'. What an amazing affirmation for the young man coming from nowhere as he stands on the threshold of a new life! He is not coming from nowhere! He belongs to God, who says a resounding 'Yes' to his chosen path. Being assured that, living out his uniqueness as a child of God by belonging to and sharing in a human community, was the right way.

This was, of course, only the first step of Jesus' new life. There was a lot more to be worked out about the meaning of those marvellous words. A 40 day fasting in the desert was the next step and even that was not enough, it had to be followed by daily decisions about life's many and varied challenges. Jesus' example encourages us to believe that there are special blessings that can only be received in the company of others. *Part of the blessing is the gift of those others.* His example also indicates that our togetherness is, in fact, the major sign and kernel of God's mission we have been called to. That, in God's Kingdom there is an interconnectedness, which embraces all creation and that our care is to start with the least, the weakest, those, of no consequence, or social status.

Following Jesus' life after his baptism, we can see some other sure signs of the Kingdom he became a messenger of. He not only announced them but also enacted them. I don't think he knew everything the moment he started his ministry. It is more likely that through constant prayer, day by day he learnt more and more of what was the meaning of being 'God's beloved son'. He came to understand that God was compassionate and cared for human suffering, so he healed people. He saw people's loneliness and isolation, so he assured them of God's very presence among them and within them by offering them his own company. He felt the weight of the prevailing social system, where one lot of people and nations oppressed others. So, his teachings were pointing to a

radically new way of living together, where 'the first would be last and the last would become first'.

Standing on the threshold of a New Year our custom is to wish each other a Happy New year. I liked the one I read somewhere, which betrayed a good dose of self-knowledge and humour. It said: May your troubles last as long as your New Year's resolutions! We can easily identify with it, can't we? But, seriously, it is happiness, peace, joy and prosperity – these are some of the specifics we want for ourselves and wish for others. Perhaps you noticed that this year, not surprisingly, the good wishes also tended to include 'a healthy New Year'. Unfortunately, the shadow of the pandemic is sensed in every corner of our current lives. Yet, the Jesus, who shared our common humanity, also promised to share with us his special, baptismal blessing, which sustained him all through his life and death and beyond. As we step into 2022, let us hear God's word for ourselves, so that it may uphold us through thick and thin: You are my beloved, in you I delight. May it be so

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