

“I declare new things”
Isaiah 42:1-9, Matthew 3:13-17

8th January 2023

In the 1986 film *The Mission* a small South American native tribe is the next in line to be conquered by the Medieval Church of Europe. As members of the tribe are arming themselves against the dreaded conquerors, they are in for a surprise. If you have seen the film you will recall the magic moment when Father Gabriel, the Jesuit priest appears on the scene ‘armed’ only with a single musical instrument, an oboe, playing on it a quiet, enchantingly sweet melody now known all over the world as ‘Gabriel’s oboe’. That is the music which makes him acceptable to the tribe and through which they are converted to Christianity.

Expecting a conquering hero and getting an ordinary human being, who has to be carefully listened to in order to find out his mission – this is what it must have been like to encounter Jesus at his first public appearance down by the river Jordan. What a surprise it must have been both for John the Baptist and for everyone else, who heeded John’s prophetic words about the imminent arrival of God’s chosen Liberator.

We have heard a lot about John the Baptizer leading up to Christmas as we navigated the balancing act between exalting him as the fore-runner of the promised Messiah and blaming him for not recognising the kind of Messiah Jesus had turned out to be. Back on the second Sunday in Advent we have heard how John’s expectations were those of a powerful Judge, who would rid the people of all God’s enemies and throw them into the eternal fire. And now here comes Jesus, patiently queuing up in the line waiting to be baptised, taking off his shirt, like everyone else to be dipped into the water. With hindsight even Matthew, the Gospel writer seems to be embarrassed about having to relate the event, so he puts the words onto John’s lips to try and dissuade Jesus from his chosen action.

From start to finish, Jesus surprises everyone. He always does and says the unexpected giving headaches to his followers, his enemies, and all the theologians, who subsequently try to explain him down the centuries. Yet, paradoxically, the simplest of his audience, those in great need, those being of no account, those who are sick and can hardly move, they do get him, they sense his welcoming acceptance, his compassion and they flock after him. This may be our first lesson today: to be careful with our supposed knowledge of Jesus. He may not be exactly what we think of him. He may pop up somewhere in totally unsuitable places, among people we wouldn’t like him to be associated with. If we want to claim him as our own, like his family does in a particular incident in the Gospels, we

may find he is much larger than that. He re-interprets the meaning of family, friendship, worshipping community and seems to demand our closest attention and continuous openness in order to get him in any one situation.

In a way, this process seems to reflect Jesus’ own relationship to God as well. There is an understanding, which holds that Jesus knew everything and was in full command of his own destiny from the day of his birth to the moment of his death. But, that would deny his full humanity, which the Church rightly insisted upon from the very beginning. I believe that like us he had to make decisions every step of the way and that required a continuous openness to God. Clearly he wanted to serve God. But that could have been done in all sorts of different ways. Starting his ministry with this surprising identification with the mundane, the ordinary, lining up with the anxious, the sinful, the uncertain and the hopeless was already a deliberate choice and it has brought him to the Jordan and to John.

And there – according to the Gospel witness – he received his spiritual mandate from God by words virtually identical with those used by that great poet and prophet we call Second Isaiah. In our first reading we heard God speaking through the prophet outlining the character of a servant, who would be the instrument of the new thing God was planning to do for the exiles in Babylon. Though, from earliest times Christians applied that description to Jesus, it has to be said that, it was initially given as a wake-up call to the second generation of Judean exiles, who had found themselves in great political and social upheaval. It was at a time when even their inherited religion didn’t seem much help. And that, of course chimes with the situation of Jesus’ time centuries later. In both cases there was a need for a new theological insight, the people were ready for God’s new message of hope, which in both cases culminated in a person. Doesn’t it all sound familiar in our own times too?

The waiting for a Liberator runs through all the Jewish Scriptures, the newness that Isaiah brings into this is the way he sees this figure. Not the conquering hero, a king in King David’s mould, a righteous Judge of everybody’s dreams, but a humble servant, who would ‘not shout, or raise his voice, ...who would not break a crushed reed, or snuff out a smouldering wick’. Yet, he is not a pushover either, for ‘he would never falter... until he established justice on earth’.

Just think of the enormity of that claim, and the possibility of achieving it with the previously mentioned servant-like attributes! Is it even possible? It was certainly unheard of. Well, being a devoted Jewish person, it is safe to assume that Jesus would have known about Isaiah’s vision and even that, he would have wanted to model himself on the servant.

But all this gets interrupted here at his baptism. Matthew has no hesitation in applying God’s ancient blessing and anointing words to Jesus. Yet the words heard from heaven are not quite the same as given to the ancient Israelites.

Some years ago, the first and only time I flew to the United States with a friend, it so happened that we had been given an up-grade. Instead of the economy class we expected, to our delight we have found ourselves in the first class compartment of the plane complete with all the privileges that entailed. I think that's what happens to Jesus here at his baptism. In his consciousness he gets an up-grade: he goes down into the waters as a servant and comes up as the beloved Son.

Well, we are in the season of Epiphany. On Friday the Church has marked the Day of Epiphany, the revelation of Christ to the Gentiles with the arrival of the Magi. His baptism in the river Jordan continues that revelation, this time it is to Jesus himself. He receives the Spirit, not of servanthood, or slavery, but that of sonship leaving him the task of working it out for himself what this unique title may mean.

In all our lives we too have great moments of realization, of recognition something about God, triggering new discoveries about ourselves, or other people. May be you were blessed enough to have a moment or two of that kind during the Christmas celebrations. I think the temptation may be that we have a tendency to 'sit on those moments' as if they were some kind of ends in themselves.

I don't like everything about our Lectionary, but this time it hit me how appropriate it is that it equates the season of Epiphany with Ordinary Time. In a sense Epiphany is a highlight, a very special moment, but it is also something that is part of ordinary time. Just as, I believe it was for Jesus, our journeys of faith are also moved forward by further epiphanies. God has declared new things to the ancient Israelites, God has declared new things to and through Jesus, and I don't believe God has run out of new things to reveal to us either. New Year resolutions are not everybody's way, but we could make the arrival of 2023 a time of getting ourselves ready for the new things God will do in our lives and in our church's life. And working out the ways we can align ourselves with those new things.

Of course, sometimes the problems facing us can only highlight our powerlessness in solving them, whether they be the great injustices of the world, our private burdens or the difficulties of our complicated personal relationships. In their predicament the exiles in Babylon were given the challenge of the 'servant' model, embodying power in powerlessness, which carried with it God's delight. As if they were told, 'your disempowered state does not disqualify you from pleasing God and finding your way home'. But Jesus, and in him we too have been given the amazing up-grade; the Spirit of God's very self, in whose strength we are enabled to go forward.

In the Book of Revelation, John, the author passes on messages from God to seven early Christian churches. Every one of those messages starts with the

phrase 'I know'. We can hear them for ourselves: 'I know that you have but little power...', 'I know your works...', 'I know your toil and patient endurance...', 'I know your affliction and poverty, even though you are rich...', 'I know your love, faith and service...'.
I cannot think of more encouraging words for myself and for every one of us at the start of a new year. God knows all about us. We haven't been forgotten. And even as we speak God is preparing new things, new epiphanies for us. So, in conclusion, let us together affirm our faith in God's epiphany for us today as we use the words of Affirmation from the service sheet:

We believe that God is present here,
meeting us within our worship,
speaking into every heart,
offering wisdom for every mind
and breathing hope into every soul.
We believe that, in Christ,
all things are possible
and in the Spirit
all life is made new.
This we believe.

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