



## **Baptism Epiphany**

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Baptism of Jesus

Isaiah 42: 1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

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The season of Epiphany, is upon us, last week the Epiphany of the wise men, this week of Jesus - the heavens torn open at his baptism. All we hear from Matthew's gospel is a seeming private interchange between John and Jesus then Jesus baptism and epiphany moment. It's an abrupt shift from the turmoil of the preceding verses. Crowds streaming to John the Baptist who in full voice thunders words of warning and doom. In midst of such chaos wanders Jesus. He engages John in this quiet exchange, which seems to be missed by the crowds pushing and jostling by the river..

Having agreed terms, John baptizes Jesus in the river, quite possibly one in the midst of many. When Jesus comes up from the water the heavens opened to him. The Spirit of God descends, a voice from heaven speaks. To Jesus. To no one else. Not even to John. And that's it. In Luke, the whole crowd's wowed by the sight of the dove and the voice and the blessing words, My Beloved Son. It was epic, an epiphany for the record books -according to Luke. But in Matthew, this epiphany is for Jesus - a heart deep knowing for him of his beloved belonging. Are such Epiphany stories limited to biblical text?

A couple of years ago, around this time of year, I was quietly working in the office, when the door burst open. A diminutive but high energy young Maori woman entered. A little dishevelled, worn backpack, partially open, slung from her shoulders, she entered with purpose.

She was looking for a minister. "That'd be me," I said. "Ok," she said, "I want to talk to you about the Bible." A little taken aback I invited her into the office I was using. She pulled out from her backpack a large and well-worn Bible, I mean large, one of those old ones with sketches and pictures, it filled her backpack. She wanted to know stuff, she opened pages and talked, prowled around the office looking at book titles, interested, enquiring, driven. After some time and a cup of tea or two she looked at me and said "I want to get baptised, will you baptise me?" "Oh, umm, yeah, there's usually a bit of a process before that," I responded. "What's needed? I can do that." "There's a bit of lead in, conversation and so on." "We've done that, what else." "Well, it's part of you joining a community, so it's good to have someone with you to support you." "You're part of this community, can't you be my support?"

All my training was being unstitched, reasonably. The institutional church rules of proper engagement falling away. At the heart of it, she was asking for baptism, who was I to stand in the way? So, "When?" was my next tentative question. "Today," was the response. She was in Auckland briefly to sort out some things at the Courts, which she'd come to realise were closed at this time of year. With hardly any money she was staying in her car, the police had moved her on a couple of times because the car didn't have a current WOF or rego., but they were really nice about it.

Swallowing, a little uneasy, I thought, still, this is baptism, it's OK. I told her I needed some details to do the certificates, could she give me her usual address and was there someone who could be her support? She was happy to give me the details. After a bit of thought, she said she was pretty sure her brother would support her. So we made a time for later that day.

I had no idea whether she'd return, or what might happen. But she was there, energy firing, excited beyond belief that this was going to

happen. Dragging her brother with her, younger I'd say, tall, silent, clothing well-worn, brushed clean hard to see through the long hair and beard. We gathered around the font, followed the service, water, oil, light, she was joyous, her brother silent, other than joining with her in the required responses. Afterward she danced and wept with joy.

Her brother still standing stiffly, uneasy said something to her, quietly, out of my earshot. She turned to me and said that he wanted to get baptised, would I do that? Well, what's a rule book? So, yes, we baptised him. Afterwards he just stood there, smiling, tears streaming freely down his face, dripping from his beard. There are no words. Was this the first time he felt seen?

John the Baptist urges people to turn to God, to choose to respond to God who calls. Calls us to see and know our heart deep beloved belonging. God who desires relationship yet leaves the choice to engage in human hands.

Is our response to God **necessary** for God to love us? Is following a religious way necessary to be included in God's care? In his book 'The Great Partnership,' Jonathan Sacks makes insightful comment, "The statement that every human being is in God's image precedes both the universal covenant with Noah in Gen 9 and the particular covenant with Abraham in Gen 17, to tell us our humanity precedes our religious identity, whatever that may be." Jonathan former Chief Rabbi, firmly located in the Jewish faith. As Christians we'd claim a further covenant through Christ.

If by being human, we're made in God's image, divine reflection, what of religion? What of baptism, does it make a difference? Understood as the sacrament by which people become members of the church, the body of Christ, united in Christ, gains access to God, to salvation, to being saved. These things express the tradition of the Christian

church and its practices of faith. Baptism embodies the human choice to respond to God's initiating call, it changes those baptised. The implied corollary extending from this - that a human institution has power to deem some included thereby some excluded, or denied fullness of God relationship - this I struggle with.

Baptised, not baptised, religious, not religious. In our journey through life does it make a difference? If you're baptised, religious it makes a difference, if you're not it's a moot point. Karen Armstrong suggests, "Religious people ... aspire to live generously, large-heartedly and justly, to inhabit every single part of their humanity. Instead of being a mere workaday cup, they want ... to transform themselves into a beautiful ritual vessel brimful of the sanctity that they are learning to see in life. They try to honour the ineffable mystery they sense in each human being and create societies that honour the stranger, the alien, the poor and the oppressed. Of course they fail. But overall they find that the disciplines of religion help them to do all this. "

Karen Armstrong (The Case for God) present tense

The sister and brother of two years ago were changed, something deep and joyous expressed through them. All they'd asked of me was to witness and confirm God's seeing and knowing them. They were bearers of grace that day. I was changed by the gift of their knowing. Epiphany – breaking open revelation. What is the measure and who decides the boundaries of such things? We can wrap and tie ourselves in knots to be correct and in control and in the meantime miss seeing the life of God breaking in, yearning to be seen and heard.

Listen, hear God's speaking to you, "You are my beloved, with you I am well pleased." This moment, let it be, let it resonate through you, accept the embrace of who you are.