

Reflection on the Baptism of Christ 2021

In one of Alexander McCall Smith's 'Scotland Street' novels, Angus Lordie submits the following verse to the hymn revision committee of the Church of Scotland:

*God's never heard of Belgium, but loves it just the same.
For God is kind and doesn't mind, he's not impressed with fame.*

Unfortunately for Mr Lordie, 'God Looks Down on Belgium' did not prove to be quite what the committee wanted.

Most of the sentiments in Lordie's pseudo-religious doggerel are admirable, but surely God has heard of Belgium? Or is God not quite as omnipotent as we imagine? Or, at the very least, God doesn't act in the way we might hope and expect? This idea deserves more serious consideration. For example, a leading commentator on St Mark's account of the baptism of Jesus observes: 'God certainly has a surprising and low-key way of changing the world – he does not seem to have absorbed the principles of PR.'

And it's rather hard to argue with that conclusion. In our story, Jesus does not burst onto the world scene, but emerges out of a shuffling crowd of penitents on the bank of a muddy river in the wilderness of Judea. Much as Mark tries hard to emphasise the cosmic significance of what has just happened, he cannot hide the reality of what seems to have been an essentially private rather than public revelation, albeit one from which extraordinary consequences will flow.

The story of Jesus's baptism sets the scene for everything else that follows in Mark's 'Good News' in a strange and somewhat paradoxical collision of three truths: The first is that God works most typically in quiet, intimate, interpersonal ways, through each of us. The second is that God is wonderfully and fully present in the events described by St Mark, and thirdly, that God's presence here marks a real and very significant, world-changing, new beginning.

The recognition that God works quietly in the world, almost behind the scenes, often choosing the most apparently unsung and unpromising collaborators is signified right at the start of the story of Jesus's baptism by the terse admission that Jesus comes from the back of beyond, Nazareth of Galilee, an off-the-beaten-track place of no apparent significance whatsoever. It is then followed up by Jesus's calling of a rather startlingly random group of characters to be his special co-workers in his life of service, in which he moves almost restlessly among the ordinary people of Palestine, enjoying the company of outcasts and those whom society had rejected, even those whom good folk might look down upon with equally good reason.

The very real presence of God was easier to describe. Mark lets us into the secret of an intensely private event, but in the pouring out of the Spirit on Jesus he wants us to know that it is truly God who has emerged onto the scene, not just some agent of his will. John the Baptist makes that connection clear: it is Jesus who will baptize us with the Holy Spirit, doing something that only God can do. Mark then draws on the Old Testament to make it quite clear that Jesus's sonship is distinct and special, a fulfilment of the most ardent hopes and dreams of the prophets. Jesus is the longed-for Messiah. And everything about John supports this, even his clothes and diet, which are so specified to remind us precisely of Elijah, who is destined to herald the arrival of this Messiah. But the naming of Jesus here as Son of God is portentous in its own right. Only in the account of the Transfiguration and on the cross will it be repeated.

The dramatic image of the rending of the heavens symbolizes our third truth that in this event God, as Isaiah prophesied, is doing something new. The way in which Jesus arrives in the world may not be what we expect, but God can never be contained by the narrow conventions of our human imagination, as the rest of the story told breathlessly over the next 16 short chapters by Mark will reveal. God understands well enough the limits and short-sightedness of most human PR strategies.

Most important, however, the story told by Mark continues to signify God's presence in a world that today is just as much in need of Good News. It is no accident that it all takes place in the wilderness, which for some of John's and Jesus's contemporaries may have romantically signified a simpler, less complex way of life, but which in reality was tough and harsh, a place where hard truths could not be dodged. And so it is that in our world, spoiled by disease, and made cynical by those whose idea of service is to glorify themselves by trying to hold onto power at all costs, God still comes to do something new.

God's way of working hasn't changed. God will never be tempted by the quick fix or grand gesture. God continues to work in and through those who are gently but insistently called and invited to be the body of his Son in today's world. God trusts and relies upon us, but equips us in the task of loving and caring to which we're called by the gift of Holy Spirit. In other words, God is with us even in the dark and difficult days we now face.

And perhaps it matters not greatly whether or not God has heard of Belgium. Human fame has never counted for much with God. What matters more is surely the reality of the warmth of his love and kindness, which those who live in Belgium (and here) can surely feel moving among us, spreading like a vaccine of hope and new beginnings.