



Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church January 11, 2015

Mark 1: 4-11

I have always had a fascination with words; their meaning and derivation or origin. As well as the complex origins of English, Anglo Saxon, Norman French, Celtic, Latin and others, when reading scripture so much of the background is in names and terms that mean something in Hebrew, and it's worth finding the meaning to help understand the scripture.

The reading today from Mark is about John - the common starting point in all the gospels for Jesus mission - and it has intrigued me for a long time; where does this word baptism come from? It's used in the gospels in a way that implies that everyone knows what it means. If you look up a concordance, you find that baptism comes from the Greek word 'baptisma', coming from the verb 'to fully immerse in water'. That's interesting, but not a lot of help because it only leads us a part of the way; a word is connected with an action, so what is the origin of the action? We can't go back in scripture, to an Old Testament or an Apocryphal source, to find an origin for what John was doing by immersing people in water. Scholars point to a ritual for converts to Judaism to be washed all over to symbolise a cleansing as the origin of John's baptism, but it was unheard of for people born to Judaism to be ritually washed. Some point to the Qumran community – the origin of the Dead Sea Scrolls – as the inspiration for John, but there is no way of connecting John with that community. Indeed his willingness to baptise all those who came to him would be an anathema to the priests at Qumran. Somehow John was inspired to step outside the religious culture, and come up with the idea of immersion to symbolise a person's willingness to repent and seek forgiveness from God.

I think we underestimate how radical this was. John was not just operating outside the sacrificial system but also asking people to step outside the concept of corporate responsibility to God. John's new construction of repentance for forgiveness set people before God as individuals. Sin was no longer covered by belonging to the family of Abraham, or by performing a public ceremony for everyone's sins. Wherever John got the idea for baptism, the shift from corporate accountability to God, to personal responsibility was the perfect preparation for the coming ministry of Jesus.

So I may not know where John got the idea from, but I understand what he was doing and how the Greek word for washing becomes a ceremony for repentance. That

understanding however becomes a whole new question when we get to today's passage; why did Jesus need to be baptised?

Mark begins his gospel by proclaiming Jesus as the Son of God. Here, in his first story of Jesus, he has the Son of God undergoing a baptism of repentance. Why does the Son of God need to repent? Our understanding of baptism seems at odds with our understanding of Son of God. This was obviously a question for the early church as well, as the differences in the four gospels shows. In Matthew's version, John protests about who should baptise who, and Jesus responds by saying that his baptism will fulfil all righteousness, whatever that means! Luke is a bit tactful and distances the coming of the Spirit from the actual baptism, and John avoids any mention of baptising Jesus. An answer might come in looking at what we mean by repentance.

Our understanding of repentance comes from the focus on sin, hence we ask, what sin does the Son of God need to repent? The question fades away if we think anew about repentance; instead of sin, think in terms of relationship with God. Repentance is our willing openness before God, an acknowledgement of a truthful relationship; who we are and who God is. Repentance is the acknowledgement of our place before God and our need for God. From that point of view, baptism for Jesus is no longer a question of repentance of sin but an issue of declaration of relationship. Jesus is, in public baptism, acknowledging his acceptance of his role as Son of God being Son of Man - one of us. Jesus chooses baptism as a statement of his willingness to follow the path that God had set before him – a relationship of openness and need. Jesus is not some kind of superman; came to earth with powers and abilities beyond those of mortal men. The constant picture in the Gospels is one of a man in need of God's support and strength; the reliance on God symbolised in the baptism is played out in the temptations, in constant private devotions and in constant reference to the Father. Jesus life and mission, beginning with the baptism, model the relationship to God that the honesty of the repentance of baptism calls for.

Any mystery about the origin of the word baptism is because there's a change happening through the early life of the church that isn't announced or explained, it just happens. John's rite of baptism is taken up and changed by the apostles to become the entry rite of the Christian community. The blurring of the followers of John and the new followers of Jesus is shown in the passage from Acts today; the common use of baptism must have caused some confusion. Indeed, it may be that it is the early church who named the rite baptism and Mark needs to distinguish the two by calling John's action a 'baptism of repentance'. Our relationship with God rests on Jesus; our baptism is not simply a continuation of John's baptism of repentance. More than just acknowledging who God is and who we are, we are also acknowledging who Jesus is. For us there is an assurance

built on Jesus taking on the role of Son of Man, living our life of need before God and therefore bringing about acceptance in faith in Him.

Baptism is more than a symbol of washing away sin; the life and death nature of being immersed in water symbolises setting your life before God just as the repentance is an honest acknowledgement of our need to be with God in this life. In undergoing baptism, Jesus aligned himself with all who will similarly acknowledge that they need to be in relationship with God. Instead of the question about why Jesus should need to be baptised, the story of Jesus and John comes down to acknowledging that our baptism rests on the acceptance by Jesus of his.