

“You are my Son, the Beloved...”

Mark 1: 1 – 13

Do you ever have difficulty in thinking about Jesus as a real person?

Most of us find it incredibly hard sometimes to get behind those two thousand years of layers of interpretation and tradition that the Christian church has placed on the original stories of Jesus' life.

Don't you think it's difficult for us to visualize him as a human being, with feelings and emotions and physical sensations like we experience?

In our efforts to place him on the pedestal of Son of God, we can forget that he was also someone who lived a completely human life.

We may imagine that all that happened to him - his resistance to temptation, his call to ministry, even his terrible death through betrayal and hatred - was somehow easier for him because he didn't think or feel the way we do.

And yet the original storytellers of his life, the gospel writers, give us quite a different picture.

They tell the story of a man who agonized and suffered through the very depths of his humanness, whose life was overwhelmingly a powerful witness and message because he was 'one of us'.

This morning, let's imagine what it might have been like for the man Jesus, as he reached his thirtieth year, a year of crucial decision for him.

He had lived most of his life in this village of Nazareth in the province of Galilee.

Galilee was in the north of the country of Palestine, separated by the area of Samaria from Judea and the great city of Jerusalem.

Living in this region of Galilee, people were to some extent distanced from the political turbulence that was experienced in Judea, but they were still Jews living under the rule of the Roman Empire.

Jesus, like his father Joseph before him, probably studied religious tradition and the scriptures at the synagogue in the village, taught by the local rabbi.

No doubt he also learned the trade of carpentry from his father, and after his father died perhaps carried on the same occupation, making useful things needed by the local people around him.

He was probably the support of his widowed mother, living quietly with younger brothers and sisters.

And as time went by they would have married and started to raise families of their own.

But Jesus perhaps knew, deep down, that his destiny was along different lines, that would take him away from his own home and village.

He may have had the sense that a difficult and dangerous path was ahead of him.

But how was he to start?

Where was he to begin?

What particular direction was the one for him?

As he cut and planed the wood in his small workshop on the village street, there could have been growing within him a sense of urgency, a sense that he was being called - but to do what?

Perhaps he thought about other friends who had grown up with him, but who had left the village to join a movement known as the Zealots.

These Zealots were a guerrilla group of Jewish bravados who lay in wait, ambushing and killing their Roman conquerors whenever they got a chance.

They were tough and aggressive - convinced that by harassing and fighting the Roman soldiers that one day they would eventually drive them out of the country.

The Romans feared them so much that they were merciless in putting them to death whenever they were captured.

Yet Jesus knew, deep down, that the way of violence, the way of vengeance was not the road he was to take.

But there were other roads.

Maybe a friend, strangely dressed in white, had come back to the village on a visit.

Perhaps this friend would tell of how he had joined a community of people living around the Dead Sea to the south, a group called the Essenes.

Their days were spent quietly in study and meditation, in peaceful isolation from the rest of society which they rejected.

No doubt there was great appeal to Jesus in the tranquil, calm life of this little group of hermits who shared their daily routine and their inner feelings with one another.

And yet somehow he also knew that he could not retreat from society, could not turn his back on it.

God's way was not to condemn or ignore the world but somehow to save it.

One day Jesus heard the latest news of his cousin John.

John who had always been 'different' - who had gone into the desert regions and joined that strange and dedicated group called the Nazarenes, leading their simple life style.

But now John had come to the edges of the wilderness area, where the river Jordan ran south into the Dead Sea.

In his fiery turbulent way he was preaching, and crowds of people were flocking from Jerusalem - quite a long and dangerous trip - to listen to him.

John called for repentance and confession of sin.

And as an outward sign of that repentance people by the hundred were wading into the Jordan waters, accepting the ancient symbolic act of baptism, acknowledging their changed selves.

But John's message also pointed away from himself, towards someone else who was to come from God, who was to reveal God's power and God's Spirit in the world.

Perhaps Jesus pondered about whether he was to be that one - if this was his call, if John was the herald and messenger pointing to him.

He felt compelled to go and see.

And so, one fateful day, he put down his carpenter's tools, he walked away from his home in Nazareth and he made his way towards Judea.

Maybe his friends and neighbours called him crazy, and his mother wept.

But something stronger drew him southward, called him to the banks of the Jordan.

And as he watched and listened to John the Baptist, he realized that he too, must outwardly demonstrate a change and decision in his own life.

So along with all the others, he took off his outer robe and waded in to the water.

John's strong arms supported him as he let himself sink under the water - let everything go, trusted implicitly.

And as the waters flowed all around him it was like a kind of dying - and a new beginning.

As he came to the surface again he could hear the voice within him and echoing all around him - a voice that called him and affirmed him in the task that lay ahead, a voice that linked him uniquely with God who was also his loving Father, a voice which gave him power to begin to do what he had to do.

He knew it would be a lonely task but that God would not forsake him and would always be with him.

And so, as he came out of the water he understood that his next steps were to take him into the desert region.

There he would meditate and prepare, there he would wrestle with call and with temptation, there he would come face to face with both demons and angels.

And finally he would be ready to begin to carry out God's work.

All four gospels record this story of the baptism of Jesus.

It was a crucial, a pivotal event in his life, marking the beginning of his obedient ministry, obedient even to the end in death on a cross.

It was when Jesus fully realized his call to serve others, to be in solidarity with his fellow men and women in their pain and sinfulness and brokenness.

As was mentioned when we read Mark's gospel this morning, this writer doesn't bother with any birth stories, in fact with anything before this moment.

For Mark, baptism is the beginning.

"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan"

In Mark's account, as Jesus submits to baptism, all the action comes from God.

God's power, God's Holy Spirit becomes alive in Jesus.

Like a dove descending, is the poetic way Mark expresses it.

And it is the voice of God which echoes within and around Jesus, affirming him and assuring him of his unique relationship with God.

Still today, we as Christians view this rite of baptism as a basic, visible symbol of what the church teaches and stands for, what it gives to those of faith and what it calls forth from us.

In the story of Jesus' baptism things happen which remain true for every baptism.

For Jesus, it marked the beginning of his active ministry.

His work was just starting - the commencement of which was for him a long and painful journey.

For a child or an adult baptized in the Christian church it is also a sign and symbol that something new has started to happen.

And that word 'started' is important.

Baptism marks the very beginning of a spiritual journey which goes on for the whole of the rest of our lives.

When a baby is baptized it is not merely a pleasant little ceremony and excuse for a family gathering.

The parents make solemn promises on behalf of their infant son or daughter, to raise their child with an understanding of the Christian faith.

And the whole congregation also promises their support, so that as children grow and begin to make their own faith decisions ideally they have been nurtured along the way by many others.

In adult baptism we make these promises for ourselves, but even so it is only a beginning, a door being opened, the start of a journey of Christian faith which hopefully will continue in the days and years ahead.

But baptism is not really an action by human beings, it is an action of God.

It was God whose Spirit descended on Jesus as a dove, God whose voice resounded in Jesus' ears, God who affirmed him as "beloved".

In baptism we do not reach out to God - God reaches for us, and claims us as God's own child.

And God continues to reach out to us throughout our lives - God will not leave us alone but will be present to us even when our lives finish and what was begun at baptism is completed.

We have received the gift of God's Spirit which begins to work within us.

Sometimes we respond in faith to the Spirit's leading, other times we may turn our backs and ignore it.

But nevertheless God has named us and claimed us, and given to us the Spirit as gift.

Even Jesus himself did not appear to know the end from the beginning.

Perhaps he had premonitions, but he lived by faith and guidance, as do we all.

For him also baptism was only the start of his calling and mission.

But he began with the assurance and certainty that God's power and grace and love were given to him and would be there for him whatever happened.

We too, in recalling our own baptism, even if we were too young to remember it, also have that assurance that this was when God first claimed and called us, and that we are God's beloved children.

And so we say - Thanks be to God.