

“The family of Christ”

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8 January 2012

Genesis 1:1-5, Mark 1:4-11

Every year in early January we read again the story of the baptism of Jesus. After the Christmas events we move very quickly to the commencement of Jesus' ministry, around 30 years later. His baptism in the Jordan River, by John the Baptist, marks the beginning of the 2-3 years of Jesus' ministry, which of course culminates in his crucifixion and resurrection in Jerusalem.

Let me remind you again of the three extraordinary things which happen as Jesus is baptised:

- first, Jesus sees the heavens torn apart; in Isaiah chapter 64 there's a terrible cry from the heart by the suffering Hebrew people in captivity several hundred years before Christ, pleading "O that you would tear the heavens open and come down"; at Jesus' baptism God does, heaven is opened, God is accessible, God is no longer remote;
- second, the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove; here's the power and the peace of this good news age, coming to equip Jesus for his mission;
- and third, God speaks - "you are my Son, the beloved" - revealing himself as God of love.

Now, what's particularly good news about these three things, is that through Jesus' ministry and death and resurrection, each of them is extended to embrace all who follow Jesus:

- first, Jesus brings people into living relationship with God who is now with us; and remember how on Jesus' death the gospels tell us that the curtain of the Temple in Jerusalem, the entry barrier to the Holy of Holies, is torn apart, from top to bottom - God again showing he is now not restricted to any particular place on earth, he is not captive in any house of worship; God is accessible to all;
- second, Jesus offers God's peace and God's power to all who open themselves to God; remember how at Pentecost the Holy Spirit is gifted to all 120 followers who were there waiting in Jerusalem, men and women alike, with the extra huge promise that the Holy Spirit is now there for everyone who trusts in God. God's power and peace is available to all;
- and third, Jesus teaches that everyone is loved by God and everyone who follows him is a child of God, sisters and brothers of one another; God is no longer to be feared, for God is love; God's loving family is not just for Jesus and his immediate disciples, it's open to all of us.

A new era is inaugurated at Jesus' baptism. It's an era of good news - God is accessible to us, God's power and peace are available to us, God is love towards us. None of those developments - heaven opened, the Spirit given, God revealed as love - has ever been withdrawn, they've never been countermanded. We still live in this good news age.

All of us here today are part of the family of Christ. Our baptisms, whether as infants, children or adults, and our ongoing faith in God, have brought us into God's family. We wouldn't be here at worship today if we didn't want to be part of God's family.

I want to conclude today by reflecting a little on the nature of God's family, how we are similar yet a little different to "normal" human families. Just four points:

First, God's family welcomes diversity. Most human families recognise that each family member is a unique human being – but in human families we tend to be of the one skin

colour, the one cultural background, the one language. In God's family there is immense diversity – because God has created us that way. In God's family we welcome people of every language and culture under the sun, people who are poor and rich, people with high education and people with none, people with many talents and people with few, people with different sexual identities, women, men, children, young and old – all are welcome in God's family, and all are equally loved by God in God's family. We welcome diversity.

Second, just as in most human families we care for one another. One example of how God's family cares can be seen in times of bereavement. In the past four months we've had six members of our Wesley family die. That's brought a very significant sense of loss and grief. In each case the immediate family of those who've died have spoken of how the church family members have cared for them, have kept in close touch with them, have visited frequently, have prayed with them, have loved them. God's family cares for all its members, deeply.

Third, just as in most human families, we learn from each other. No one in God's family knows everything. No one in God's family has a monopoly on truth, except God. Every one of us can be wrong, except God. We will learn through our differences, and through our disagreements. Because the members of God's family love and respect each other, then differences and disagreements become not a source of division but a source of learning. In God's family we learn from each other.

And fourth, in God's family we know we are more than just a human family. We know God's Spirit is with us. So when we chat over morning tea, when we meet in a home fellowship group, when we join in a Bible study, when we go walking on Wednesday mornings, when we pray and worship together, we know that God is with us. And we know that God has wisdom, good sense, guidance, to give to us. So we pray in God's family, so we share our perceptions of what God has to say to us, so we rejoice in knowing God loves every single one in God's family. We are more than just a human family.

As we move into this new year, we do well to remind ourselves of what God was doing for us in the baptism of Jesus, as Jesus commenced his mission. And we rejoice that God's Spirit, given to Jesus then, is given to us too – every day – incorporating us into God's family, enabling us to welcome diversity, to care for each other, to learn from each other and to know the love, peace and wisdom of God available to us every day.

To the glory of God, Amen.