

Epiphany – Wesley 9 am service - 12th January 2014

Theme: 'The Baptism of Jesus'

Readings: Matthew 3: 13-17

Bishop Robinson “saved” by the words

(Vicky) Gene Robinson is now retired as a bishop in the Episcopal Church in the USA. He was the first openly gay bishop to be ordained in a mainstream church. As a result of his election, many conservative Episcopalians abandoned the Episcopal Church and formed the Anglican Church in North America and aligned themselves with bishops outside the United States. Bishop Robinson has written several books and travels widely, speaking on the theme of inclusiveness in Christian communities.

Last year he accepted an invitation by some Baptist and Uniting churches, to speak in Newcastle, Sydney and Melbourne. I note with interest that he does not appear to have been invited into any Sydney Anglican churches. In a thoughtful discussion with the iconic Atheist Phillip Adams, I heard him speak at length of his childhood living in great poverty, and an early realisation of his gay orientation and the impossibility of being accepted if he were to “come out”. However, he did eventually, amidst great controversy and protest.

As an adult, he had profound reservations about entering the ministry, and particularly about standing for election as a bishop. He says that a pivotal point was in reading those words from Matthew 3:17 "This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased." From that point, he was in no doubt that he was, indeed, just as much one of God's chosen people as anyone else, and that he should be pleased and proud of his own identity and mission. This insight was, indeed, **an epiphany** for him!

Epiphany

Monday 6th January, as we mentioned last week, was the feast of Epiphany, the end of the Twelve Days of Christmas, in which we celebrate the experience of a personal encounter with God. The name of Shakespeare's play “Twelfth Night” relates to these twelve days.

The word “Epiphany” comes from Greek meaning appearance or revelation. It's used to speak of either an appearance of a divine being, or of the revelation of the basic nature of something or some essential truth. That is how it gets its association with light. Something is suddenly illuminated and made clear.

Something comes to light, becomes apparent to all who look. The Christian celebration of Epiphany then, is the celebration of the revelation of God's nature and purpose in the appearance of Christ. The story of the visit of the magi bearing gifts for the new baby is traditionally associated with Epiphany, because it speaks of the truth about who Jesus is and will become. And it does it in a rather provocative way by using the Magi.

It seems to me that the timing of this, immediately after the Christmas, New Year and holiday frolics, is rather early, because it's supposed to be a process

of deep meditation and reflection. However, it's part of the Christmas story, and it's never too soon to recognise and rejoice in our life with God.

Children of Israel – “God’s Chosen People” ?

The New Testament is full of references to Jesus accepting the Jews and the Gentiles, rich and poor, women and men, the social mainstream and the outcasts – all as his people. David Thiem was telling us on Thursday about his reading of the biography of former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon – a great military hero in the 1947 Israeli War of Independence (some of us would say as a terrorist), and Prime Minister 2001 to 2006. He makes it very clear throughout his extraordinary life that the Children of Israel are God's chosen people whose path is right, and everyone who disagrees is wrong. This Old Testament interpretation is clearly contrary to the teaching of Christ, but remains as a powerful driver of social, political and military affairs to the present day!

Today's reading from Acts: “ ... everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” doesn't seem to specify an acceptability filter based on race, culture, gender or social class. It says “everyone who believes ... “ That seems pretty clear to me, and a challenge for us to be open to everyone.

Of course, there's a practical problem here: If people come or bring an infant to the Minister for baptism, but express no intention to live within the community of the church, would the sacrament carry any significance for them or for the congregation? Now that it's no longer conventional social practice for everyone to be “christened”, as they say, in order to ensure an eventual pre-paid passage to heaven, we have many fewer baptisms than a couple of generations ago, and most infants miss-out. But perhaps we should see this as a benefit, in that those coming for baptism will be truly appreciative of the privilege, and inclined to live-out the baptismal promises.

Water – For Fighting and for Baptism !

Certainly the nature of the Children of Israel's escape from oppression would give them grounds for the belief of being God's Chosen People. They recall the waters that were held back by their God as they fled from Egypt. Having been brought safely to the other side, the people of Israel watch as the waters are released upon their pursuers. The water that means salvation for God's people also means destruction for their oppressors. Throughout human history, water has been both a gift and a threat; both friend and foe; water has given life and water has taken life away.

Periodic floods in Australia, and extraordinary events like earthquake waves and hurricanes continue to defy prediction and counter measures. Improvements in stock transport and controversial measures like dam-building all help make our agriculture more resistant to the effects of drought, but we're still ultimately dependent on the weather. Other parts of the world are even more vulnerable, such as the heavily-populated, coastal deltas of Asia, and the disputed control of river catchments in the Middle East and Africa. The assertion attributed to Mark Twain over a hundred years ago, that “Whiskey is for drinking; Water is for fighting over” was sadly prescient, and water-based

conflicts will certainly increase, particularly with the ravages of climate change.

So the numerous Biblical references to water, and in particular its use in the baptism of Jesus, are profoundly meaningful to Christians.

Our Celebration of the Sacrament of Baptism

These accounts of baptism are significant for our own practice. Baptism is a proclamation of God's love in which we all share. Each time someone is baptised, we're all reminded again of how much God loves us, because our baptism links us to Jesus, the ultimate symbol of God's love. By recalling our baptism we're reminded that we're called to respond to God's love by enacting and celebrating that love in Christian service. We are called to live out our baptism as Jesus lived out his.

Baptism offers us the life of Christ through the sign of water. Baptism tells the story of God's love and embraces us all in that love (as Bishop Robinson came to see). In baptism we rediscover that God is active in the world and loves the world. We see ourselves as rebellious and sinful people whom God loves, in spite of ourselves.

Baptism tells the story of God's righteous judgment and grace. It tells us the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and unites us to Christ. Baptism is the sign of the new covenant between God and God's people. We receive the Holy Spirit and wait expectantly for the coming kingdom.

Baptism signifies God's life-giving renewal given freely and abundantly. The Uniting Church celebrates two great signs of God's work, baptism and the Lord's supper as sacraments – sacred or special events. The sacraments intimately involve us in Christ's life, death and resurrection. Christ acts through baptism to form the church. It thus establishes our identity as Christian people.

The baptised person may respond to God's freely-given love by turning from rebelliousness to trust in God and dependence on God's goodness. It is important to keep together the initiative and grace of God on the one hand and the human response on the other. Emphasising one, at the expense of the other, leads to extreme positions which distort the meaning of baptism.

Of course, we don't all interpret the Biblical message or its significance to us in the same way. Within our own congregation we've seen expression of divergent views on the merits of infant baptism – some oppose this on the basis that it represents the wishes of the parents rather than the child. Our church uses the baptism of people, whether adults or children, as a means to welcome them into the community of the church, promising to support and nurture them in their spiritual journey.

Some support the practice of total immersion as an expression of the cleansing power of baptism. The Uniting Church is not prescriptive on these issues – congregations make up their minds on it, just as for their preferences

on conducting Communion services. I'm not desperate about these matters, but I know that they're of deep concern to some people.

The relevance of the baptism of Jesus for our lives today?

So what can be the relevance of the baptism of Jesus for our lives today? What happened to Jesus at the River Jordan is directly linked with social justice. When Jesus was baptised in the river by John the Spirit of God came upon him as the Spirit had been expected to come upon the Messiah (as prophesied by Isaiah) and the gift of the spirit brought a very strong concern with social justice:

In Isaiah 42 we read "*I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.*" and "*In gentleness and quiet strength he would be a light to the nations.*"

Baptism represents the inclusion of foreigners: Through the gift of the Holy Spirit barriers between people of different nations were broken down. It was on all mankind that the Spirit would be poured out. There is nothing more relevant to a shrinking world than membership in the one human family.

Baptism emphasis Jesus as the representative of sinful humanity: By taking a sign of repentance when he had no personal sin of which to repent, Jesus was identifying himself with humanity in general. It was sign of how he would die.

Baptism represents fire and water as cleansing agents: When new converts were baptised with water they were washed clean. Christian baptism is a means of sharing the fire which transforms human lives.

And baptism represents the renewal of life: His Baptism was for Jesus a moment of enlightenment, a surge of certainty and self-understanding as one anointed by the Spirit of God which like a cleaning fire, would burn up the rubbish of human life and transform it with the fruit of the Spirit.

Conclusion

To share the cleansing fire, the Spirit that came to Jesus at his baptism, is to take part in the renewal of human life, for which we give glory to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen

Robert James
12 January 2014.