

**First Sunday after the Epiphany: The Baptism of our Lord (Epiphany 1B) –  
January 11, 2015  
Genesis 1:1-5; Psalm 29; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11  
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

**Baptism in a pluralistic world**

Today is the first Sunday in the Epiphany season. Epiphany, from the Greek *epiphaine* meaning to “shine forth,” is the celebration of the “shining forth,” the manifestation of God’s being and purpose in Jesus. In the Eastern Orthodox churches, the manifestation of the power and love of God was focused early on in the Epiphany event of Jesus’ baptism, which marked the beginning of his empowered public ministry. Other manifestations in this Epiphany season include, of course, the visit of the wise men, but also the boy Jesus at age 12 in the Temple in Jerusalem, Jesus’ first miracle at a wedding in the town of Cana, and the Transfiguration of Jesus on Mount Tabor.

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus, who stepped into the muddy Jordan River, marking his transition from small town carpentry into powerful public ministry, showing forth God’s presence and purpose. Now, the four gospels all tend to focus on the part of the scene when Jesus came out of the water, where he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him, and the voice declaring, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” That is, the gospels tend to focus on that dramatic part of the scene which declares and manifests Jesus’ divinity, Jesus as the Beloved Son of God. The other part of the scene?—the actual baptism?—a very human act of stepping into the muddy river?—well, that is more or less mentioned by the gospels, but as a background event.<sup>i</sup>

What strikes me is that all the strong gospel claims of Jesus’ *divinity* are made precisely at the moment where Jesus shows his *humanity* most explicitly.<sup>ii</sup> Now here’s the question: what did Jesus need to be baptized for? What did the sinless, Beloved Son of God need from a baptism, especially one described as a “baptism of repentance?” It was not being able to answer that question that led the gospel writers to stress the part of the divine voice proclaiming a divine Son while putting the actual baptism more in the background. Where the gospel writers hesitated, I will be so bold as to try to get at an understanding of this question. Implied in his becoming human to begin with, Jesus’ style was and is always to lead us from within and alongside our common humanity, more or less with the human package he was blessed with. He led with his humanity, and through that, manifested his divinity. And so, Jesus does not begin his public ministry with some great miracle or some kingly coronation. Instead Jesus gets in line, waits his turn, and receives the baptism of repentance from John. If he had chosen ways other than baptism, he would have succumbed to the temptation to be forever over us, above us, separate from us. But he did not. Instead he went into the water along with all the rest of us sinful, mortal, fallible, fragile humans who are seeking to repent and turn toward a new and hopeful way of living. Jesus who was without sin was baptized in the river to avoid the sin of standing above us, separate from us, and to turn toward us (as one of us) by coming up right alongside us.<sup>iii</sup> And so, the divine affirmation of Jesus as the beloved Son of God

occurs at the precise moment when Jesus has assumed his complete solidarity with our human identity and condition in his baptism. It is interesting to note that later when Jesus is in hot water, as it were, with the authorities in Jerusalem who question his authority, he responds by referring to baptism by John the Baptist as the only source of his authority (Mark 11:28ff.), making a consistent choice of walking the way of humanity, living and dying as one of us to carry out the purposes of the Divinity.<sup>iv</sup>

Now, as the baptism of Jesus was the moment in his life when he went public in his faith journey and discovered his public mission *to all humanity through his own humanity*, so Baptism is about our going public as his followers. But how—especially in such a divided and pluralistic world today? As my professor and spiritual guide, Roland Walls, put it:

“...it’s about the real human condition. Because God addresses us as we are...not in any kind of specially Christian way. He addresses me as a *human being*, [through] the very humanity that his Son took on for me...It’s about *humanity*, not about Christianity. There’s no word ‘Christian’ in the whole of [our] Nicene Creed. God was incarnate, he was made flesh of the Virgin, and he became [hu]man, not Christian. He became [*hu*]man. And if we spell that out at all the levels, we get into a kind of perspective that enables us to see the whole thing, not as a religion, but as a *new humanity*. It’s about the restoration of [hu]man[ity], not getting more Christians...from Charles de Foucauld...he said this: ‘It is more important to be human than to be religious.’...it is this that really [brings] alive the little phrase in the Nicene Creed, ‘And was made man.’...that is an extraordinary statement, because it’s non-religious. [Yet] It’s a faith statement...He became man. And everything else that follows comes from that little root starting point...It also interprets everything that follows, including the ‘One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.’ [All that] is subsumed under that great statement in the middle of the creed [‘and was made man’]...that’s what’s been redeemed, not some blooming religious light that’s been raised up. You don’t need to die on a cross to get some more religion going!”<sup>v</sup>

And so Baptism is first and foremost the affirmation of our common humanity with all others, in the Spirit of Jesus’ own baptism. Only then is it incorporation into the particular community called the Christian church in the manner described in our reading from Acts. Fundamentally, Jesus has come to build the bonds of our common humanity more than collecting us into groupings of Christianity.

Having said that, we need to think and pray and grapple with how we as followers of Christ shine forth those same purposes as a church in relation to the rest of the world. For some time the Episcopal Church generally has worked intentionally toward becoming a faith community dedicated to diversity and inclusivity. Of course we have a ways to go—no doubt about it. Yet in our journey we have been walking the road toward broader and deeper relationships that go beyond “inclusiveness”—that is, welcoming non-Episcopalians and even non-Christians into our church and culture—toward a true pluralism, i.e., holding a fundamental respect and regard for other religious traditions as being valid and authentic expressions of faith and hope and love in themselves, and thus

need not be “completed” by our Christianity. Sure, our public worship, on the whole, expresses our Christ-centered tradition and Episcopal Church customs, but it also strives to change and/or eliminate—or more carefully interpret—language that is disparaging of non-Christians, or that appears to promulgate the erroneous view that Christianity is the “highest,” “best,” or “only true religion,” or the equally erroneous view that Christianity is the “completion of” or “supersedes,” or will eventually “conquer” or “enfold” any and all other great faith traditions. Of course, other faith traditions have similar homework to do as we Christians do. Our faith journey as a Christian church is one that strives to be expressive of both our Christ-centered Anglican/Episcopal tradition and the broader horizons of an ecumenical and interfaith commitment to God.

And beyond, and underlying any ecumenical and interfaith efforts at dialogue with one another, we also have to state, as Roland Walls, put it:

“The...faith commitment embodied in one united fellowship will only emerge when we’ve *embodied ourselves in care for the world*. It’s *that one* we should start with: and slowly the prayer, the reading [of our respective holy writings; the dialogue over our common as well as unique elements]...and all the rest will fall into place. [But] God is not going to allow us to have a ‘religious’ embodiment [of unity] without this one...How can we have that widest ecumenism, which is about how to get the human race together?...How [do we] use what we’ve learned about dialoguing with people in the situation [within our own faith tradition or even in interfaith contexts, so as to enter and enable this even greater] width of dialogue with the human being as a human being?...we’ve been made aware, through other people telling us, just how much clutter we carry...I think we have a duty by virtue of our faith to have such a reformation of clutter [so] that we can go to the [wider] world in a simplicity...Unless this is done, I think ...ecumenism and the interfaith stuff [in relation to] the rest of the world will lose out...It might be helpful if each tradition was sent away into an ecumenical/interfaith silence, and they were each asked one question: ‘How does your form of tradition as you’ve received it enable people to take on board this [primary call to care for the world]? Then we would come together, because we would be able to understand why people do this and do that—in [all their variety and] diversity—but with a unity of the core.’”<sup>vi</sup>

The Indian theologian, M. M. Thomas said that Christianity should be defined by its center, not by its circumference.<sup>vii</sup> We are called to be loose on the edges, but solid at the core, as it were—to have our center in Christ but with few, if any, boundaries as to who is in and who is out. If we belong to Christ, we belong to no one and nothing else; and yet, if we belong to Christ who shines forth God’s purposes of wholeness, love, and justice, then we belong to everyone else in the human family and God’s creation. It is God in Christ who will complete us, not Christianity. We are not saved by our theology, or our baptism. It is God alone who saves us. Until that day of completion, there is spacious room for many different expressions of faith, hope, and love that shine forth the rainbow spectrum of God’s light to the world.

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<sup>i</sup> The Gospel of John in fact doesn’t mention it at all. Luke is very vague as to whether John the Baptist was even involved. Matthew adds an interesting exchange in which John the Baptist is there, but tries to talk

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Jesus out of being baptized. And in our gospel today, Mark speaks of the baptism but only in the most stark way—just a quick mention.

<sup>ii</sup> ...in getting in line along with a number of others, waiting his turn, and walking into the river to receive the baptism of repentance from John.

<sup>iii</sup> See also Barbara Brown Taylor, Mixed Blessings (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1998), pp. 56-60. Also: “The bath of baptism gathers up the tension between sacredness and vulnerability, for baptism is not a pleasant soak in a tub but an immersion in death. As anyone who has ever felt the pull of an ocean undertow knows, water not only has the power to support and comfort us, it has the power to destroy us as well. Waters that close over our head might never open again. Naked and unguarded, we are vulnerable when we bathe.” - Stephanie Paulsell

<sup>iv</sup> In getting in line and then wading into the water along with the rest of us, Jesus reveals something about us. He reveals to us that our real identity is not on the edges of our existence where we can boast of our unique talents and qualities, privileges and powers. Rather, our real identity is in the center where we recognize and acknowledge our common humanity and equality in all our failing and falling and fallibility. And in that fundamental recognition and affirmation of our common humanity, our deepest sense of self can be found which includes the realization of our own beloved nature as God’s sons and daughters, created and redeemed and restored in God’s image. We can then regard any unique talents and powers we have as spiritual gifts which Christ’s spirit freely offers to us to share, rather than as personal rewards for our own hard work or as badges of superiority. And if we see ourselves as especially fallible, as I certainly do, or if we don’t see ourselves as having many gifts—the more we are willing to experience our common and equal humanity with others, the more we may be able to recognize the mutual support and unique gifts which the Holy Spirit does send our way. From the cradle to the grave, and beyond, Jesus knows what we face as human beings, he shows us how to live, and walks with us each step of the way.

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in Ron Ferguson with Mark Chater, Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2006), pp. 78-79, 81, 135.

<sup>vi</sup> Quoted in Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls Ibid., pp. 146, 158-160, 163.

<sup>vii</sup> Quoted in Mole Under the Fence: Conversations with Roland Walls Ibid., p. 164.