

7 January 2018

Mark 1.4-11

Acts 19.1-7

The community of the baptized

Last year we celebrated the 500th Anniversary of the beginning of the European Reformation, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg Castle, challenging some of the practices common in the Roman Catholic Church of his time.

Martin Luther spoke of times in his life when he found himself challenged by the presence of evil in his own life and in the life of the world around him. At those time Martin Luther would often defiantly proclaim to himself, 'I am baptized'.

It was a defiant holding onto the character of the Christian life and faith that had been affirmed in his baptism, and in the faithfulness of the God of grace, whose promise of new life had been sealed in his baptism and whose promise was constant.

For the Christian community, all that shapes us as followers of Jesus is declared in our baptism – we are a community of the baptized.

Baptism is about new beginnings.

John the Baptist called upon the community of Israel at the time to make a new beginning with God.

The call to repentance was a call to make a new start with God ... to make a U-turn in their life.

Water is a powerful symbol for this.

In a whole number of religions water has been used to symbolise purification –

- washing ourselves clean
- refreshing the body as a sign of the need for a refreshed soul

There were a number of purification ceremonies in the Jewish religion at the time ... but John took this to a whole new level.

John called everyone – high and low, respectable and disreputable – to make a radical new start with God ... affirming that our relationship with God depends only on God's readiness to make a new beginning with us, based upon grace, acceptance and forgiveness.

In being baptized, Jesus himself affirmed that he lived for this God of new beginnings, who is always offering a radical new beginning to all of us, and who is always at work in this world to make new beginnings possible.

And in the manner of his living and dying Jesus showed us that God's way of making new beginnings was not to screw up the past and throw it away and to start all over again – it was to accept people for who they were, to confront the past with forgiveness, so that people are able to live with themselves again, and then to set people on a new direction for the future.

There is something healthy and affirming in this way of making new beginnings. It deals with the past, but doesn't just discard it and start again. There is a genuine sense of cleansing.

And it means that the community of the baptized will always be the community of new beginnings – not just people who were renewed at some point in the past, but people for whom the whole purpose of living is to serve the God of new beginnings.

Our God is the God who is always making all things new ...

We are a community, following Jesus,

- who will meet sinfulness (whether our own or others) with forgiveness;
- who will meet shame with acceptance;
- who will meet hatred with love and reconciliation;
- who will meet despair with hope;
- and even in the face of death in all of its forms, we, as followers of Jesus, are people of the resurrection, holding onto that faith that even death itself does not have the last word on our lives and the life of our world.

And this is not about ignoring the negative in life and running away from it, or pretending it is not there.

- We are able to look sinfulness full in the eye because of the newness that forgiveness is able to bring.
- We can have the courage to confront shame – both in ourselves and others – through the newness that acceptance can bring.
- We are able to face up to all of the hatred in the world – we do not have to turn off our television screens and be overwhelmed by hatred – because of the new thing that love can do to bring reconciliation
- The gospel of resurrection enables us to live with all of the cruelty of a good Friday world and absorb its pain.