**Sermon CCC 07.01.24. The Baptism of Christ**

*Gen 1.1-5; Psalm 29, Acts 19. 1-7, Mark 1.4-11.*

Let us begin our reflection on the readings chosen for the Feast of Christ’s Baptism with a look at today’s psalm. It shows traces of ancient Canaanite mythology, the belief that thunder was the terrifying voice of the storm god, bellowing from the sky and whipping up a whirlwind, with flashes of lightning reflected like streaks of fire on the mighty waters. The Hebrew psalmist would have thought it was foolish to suppose that the stormy sea and the lightning and the wind were the gods that rule the world (Wisdom 13:2). If these things were so wonderful that people assumed them to be gods, then they should know how much more wonderful is the God who created them (See Wisdom 13:4-5). So, in the psalm, natural phenomena like thunder, lightning and storm winds are not gods, but epiphanies—manifestations of the one God. St Paul had the same idea when he wrote, ‘Ever since the creation of the world, God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been seen and understood through the things God has made (Romans 1:20). So the psalmist hears in thunder booming over the churning sea ‘the voice of the Lord upon the waters.’ And, for the Jewish people, this recalls the beginning of creation, that we heard about in our first reading: when a wind from God swept over the dark, primeval waters subduing their chaos with a powerful word, ‘Let there be light.’

Maybe St Mark had this psalm in mind when he described the voice coming out of the opened heavens, the voice of the Lord on the waters of the river Jordan, saying to Jesus, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ And maybe, like the psalmist, St Mark was recalling the voice of God resounding over the primeval waters. Was he thinking that as Jesus began his ministry a new creation was dawning? And when Mark mentioned the Spirit descending like a dove, did he have another dove in mind? The one that flew back to Noah in his ark with a freshly plucked olive leaf in its beak? An assurance of a fresh start for the world.

The psalmists have a wonderful sense of natural phenomena as ‘the voice of the Lord’ and this is something that we all can relate to. For example, at this time of year, we instinctively feel more positive once we have passed the shortest day. If we listen, we can hear ‘the voice of the Lord’ in the turn of the seasons assuring us that the darkness will never overcome the light!

But what about the psalmist hearing ‘the voice of the Lord’ in the roar of powerful storm winds that shatter trees, even the lofty cedars of Lebanon, stripping the forest bare, frightening animals so much that they begin to give birth prematurely?[[1]](#footnote-1) Doesn’t this have a familiar ring to it, now that we are experiencing unprecedented weather events: high winds that send trees crashing down on homes, roads and powerlines; floods that make towns uninhabitable, unseasonable droughts or spells of unremitting rain that destroy crops. Can we hear ‘the voice of the Lord’ in all this? And then, when we see the worldwide impacts of climate change on our televisions, can we hear the voice of the Lord in the crash of an ice floe as it breaks off and collapses into the sea, in the ferocity of wildfires, in the howl of back-to-back tornadoes and hurricanes, in the rumble of a stampeding landslide destroying everything in its path, in all the convulsions of nature as it strikes back in fury at our neglect? Are we being told something? Surely this is ‘the voice of the Lord’ urging us to wake up out of our complacency, to become leaders instead of laggards, ‘to lace up our running shoes’ as Antonio Gutteres (Secretary General of the United Nations) urged us. That was back in 2019 and we haven’t even put these shoes on yet![[2]](#footnote-2)

Having heard a lot about Jesus’ birth and infancy in the last few weeks, today we see him grown up and being commissioned by God for his ministry. He will begin this by proclaiming in the towns and villages of Galilee an urgent message, ‘Repent!’ Change your thinking! Change your way of living! Change your priorities! For Christians living in a world that has now experienced the hottest temperatures ever recorded, and here in Ireland where the recent Storm Gerrit was the earliest G-named storm since the naming initiative began in 2015, surely this is a call to repent of our ecological sins and to change our way of living, to reconsider how we grow our food, use our land, fuel our transport and power our economy, to recognize the myth of endless growth as the dangerous illusion that it is. And we have to face up to the fact that this will cost us. For example, we should be letting our politicians know that we want Ireland to contribute generously to the Loss and Damage fund eventually set up at the recent COP 28 to help poorer countries strengthen their resilience to the effects of climate change. As a church, we must speak out in the public square to urge that this country’s contribution go beyond what voters would supposedly countenance.

Confronted with climate chaos, we can easily feel overwhelmed. I take heart from the wise words of the ecologist, Thomas Berry. ‘We must believe that we are cared for and guided by the same powers that brought us into being.’[[3]](#footnote-3) Today’s psalm begins and ends with worship, a vision of the heavenly temple where God the Creator sits enthroned as king, surrounded by a choir of heavenly beings singing, ‘Glory.’ In the Eucharist we join with all that ‘company of heaven’ as we sing, not just that heaven, but that heaven and earth are full of God’s glory. And in the Eucharist we experience what the psalm promises:

The Lord shall give strength to his people

The Lord shall give his people the blessing of peace.

We are indeed cared for and guided by the God who brought us into being. The dove brought Noah a promise that God would not let the earth be destroyed, a covenant with humankind and with every living creature (Gen 9:9-10). The Spirit of God, descending like a dove on Jesus at his baptism is given to us as well. So, we can be confident. ‘Confident’ means believing with others, trusting together.[[4]](#footnote-4) So let us give thanks as a community of faith, baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit. And let us go out from this Eucharist with renewed commitment to the fifth Mark of Mission of the Anglican Communion: ‘to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.’

Margaret Daly-Denton

1. The Coverdale Psalter version sung by the choir has ‘The voice of the LORD maketh the hinds to bring forth young.’ This translation reflects an ancient belief that thunderstorms could trigger labour. However, another possible translation is, ‘The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl’ (NRSVue) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. https://press.un.org/en/2019/sgsm19757.doc.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Thomas Berry, *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future* (New York: Bell Tower, 1999), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. From the Latin *con-fidens* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)