**Living in two realities. January 10 2020. Mark 1:4-11**

I would imagine that most of you if not all of you have seen the image on the screen. It is a classic image designed to challenge our perceptions some immediately will see a young woman, others an old woman. The process of identifying how you may see each of the perspectives can take some time, but when you can see both, it seems quite simple detecting the two images. This discovery has been called a “gestalt switch” it could probably also be seen as an “epiphany” a new perspective has come to light, a new revelation.

Last week I mentioned that the story of Jesus baptism was one of three stories commonly identified with the season of epiphany in the church year. Through this story the audience then and now can gain a fuller understanding of God, Father, Son and Spirit. It is one of only a few places where God Father, Son and Spirit are referred to within a few verses. **“**Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.”[[1]](#footnote-1) From the time of Jesus baptism a new revelation of God breaks into the world.

Jesus baptism happens within the context of John the Baptist baptising many people. His baptism was marked by repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The people thereby were opening themselves to God, recognising that changes needed to happen and acknowledging their part in the problems they were experiencing.

John’s baptism, like John’s ministry paved the way for something more. In summarising his ministry he says “I have baptised you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

In Mark’s gospel immediately after this statement, Jesus appears, ready to be baptised by John. Baptism is always a choice. John had been using baptism as a symbol of purification and commitment to change and to begin living differently. From this perspective we may question why then would Jesus be baptised?

The very act of baptism requires humility. It is a public event of responding to the grace of God. Humility is always at the core of any honest response to God. In Greek and Latin humility means “to lower”. Humility presupposes the dignity of the person, therefore there is a lowering. It also involves exercising the will, otherwise it is humiliation at the hands of others. It occurs in relationship with other people as it relates to the stance one takes in relationship to others.[[3]](#footnote-3)

John Dickson who did a PhD on this topic of humility in the ancient world defines it as “the noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Jesus makes the noble choice to identify with the needs of all humanity, to identify with the problem of sin and to deal decisively with sin through his ministry, death and resurrection.

In his baptism Jesus demonstrates humility, openness to God, commitment, obedience and a willingness to publicly align himself with the new way which John has been foreshadowing. It reminds us of the importance of remaining humbly responsive to God.

Jesus baptism signals the beginning of this new revelation of God.

Such a revelation, has cosmic impact. So Jesus baptism also is accompanied by astounding phenomena. It heralds earth-shattering events, mind-boggling concepts, experiences which defy adequate description, but also too real and significant to be ignored.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Mark describes this picture “the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him”[[6]](#footnote-6) when Jesus was baptised. It may have reminded his readers of the words of the prophet Isaiah pleading with God, “Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down so that the mountains would quake at your presence”.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The image of the heavens being torn open is difficult to comprehend. I like Tom Wright’s analogy. He says perhaps it was like “an invisible curtain being pulled back and revealing a different reality”,

“an invisible curtain being pulled back and revealing a different reality.”[[8]](#footnote-8) We often speak of Christians as being citizens of two kingdoms, two realities, this nation and the Kingdom of God. We live in the midst of this world but at times we catch a glimpse of God’s reality. For much of the time we “walk by faith not by sight”.[[9]](#footnote-9) It is sometimes said that some people are “too heavenly minded and no earthy use”, we possibly also run the risk of being “too earthly minded and no heavenly use”. The challenge as followers of Jesus is to avoid both extremes, to live authentically as citizens of God’s kingdom whilst engaging fully with our local and other communities.

Once the curtain is pulled back, then the voice comes from heaven. Israel has lived for a long period without the perception of God speaking to God’s people. There had been a lack of prophets for centuries, but the silence of God is over. [[10]](#footnote-10) God is speaking, the Holy Spirit is active and Jesus Sonship and obedience are highlighted.

The words may remind the readers of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1 which bring out the concepts of Sonship and the Servant. Throughout his ministry Jesus operates as Son of God and the Servant King, he speaks and acts with authority and yet he serves the outcast. His communion with God sustained him and he was able to confidently exercise his ministry embodying a servant style of leadership. The baptism indicates “the cosmic significance of Jesus’ submission to the Servant-vocation and affirms God’s pleasure in his Son.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Jesus baptism, this transaction between the Father and the Son is a mystery that we cannot entirely fathom.[[12]](#footnote-12) However it does indicate the point in time when Jesus began to exercise his sonship[[13]](#footnote-13)

This passage also reminds us that Jesus’ baptism ushers in our own experience of baptism. Luke in the book of Acts records Jesus saying “John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirt”.[[14]](#footnote-14) Baptism with the Holy Spirit is seen in somewhat nuanced ways throughout the Christian church. However it points to God’s presence pervading our beings. It is an action of God, not a goal to strive towards but a gift of God. God works within the lives of those who are responsive to God. God desires to enable us to develop into ‘our best selves’ to enable us to ‘fulfil the potential God planted within us’. I believe our responsiveness brings God delight, as a child’s responsiveness brings delight to their parents. It is consistent with the nature of God towards us to sense that God would say to us, “you are my dear, dear child, I am delighted with you.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

A few years ago, the church I attended had this sentence displayed on its notice board, “When God saw your birth it was love at first sight”. I recall a man who lived nearby commenting on how helpful this statement had been to him. We speak of God as our loving Father, but sometimes we may need to paraphrase these words to more fully appreciate the relationship that God desires to have with us. We may benefit from taking some time to stop, to spend time in God’s presence enjoying the relationship with share with God.

1. Mark 1:10-11 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mark 1:8 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Dickson, *Humilitas: A lost key to life, love and leadership,* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Press, 2011) 24-25 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dickson, *Humilitas,* 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. C. F. D. Moule, *The Gospel According to Mark: The Cambridge Bible Commentary on the New English Bible,* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1965) 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Mark 1:10b NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Isaiah 46:1 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone,* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge and Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. 2 Cor 5:7 NRSV [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark,* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1970) 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. William Lane *The Gospel of Mark: The New International Commentary on the New Testament,* (Grand Rapids, MI:1974) 58 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark,* 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Mark,*40 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Acts 1:5 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Wright, *Mark for Everyone,* 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)