

Baptism in Cosmic Context

Sermon by the Rev Derek Lightbourne, All Saints' Belmont, St Alban's Pauatahanui

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Keynote Bible passages: Genesis 1.1- 10, Mark 1.4 – 9

Surprising it may seem, it was some 300 years of the Christian church's life before the liturgical seasons of Christmas and Epiphany were set in place following Advent, the waiting for the Christ. Christmas came to be centred round the birth of Jesus, and Epiphany round the baptism of Jesus. (The story of the visit of the magi got fitted in a little later). The gospel of Mark highlights this importance with the opening words: 'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the Son of God'. Then proceeds to give an account of John the baptiser proclaiming a baptism of repentance. And follows with the baptism of Jesus. Hence today's major theme focus. Liturgical scholars have extended this further as the first reading is the opening of the Book of Genesis, a poem of creation.

This got me pondering about the connection between the two – baptism, and creation. Thus, this sermon message is entitled: *Baptism in cosmic context*.

The focus is *water*. Water is critical for life as we know it. Yet I wonder if we value it sufficiently. In our country we have taken it for granted there'd be plenty. However, with climate changing there seem to be increasing periods of drought. A personal comment if I may, wondering if like other aspects of life of the planet humans have taken the verse from Genesis 1 where it looks as though humanity, having dominion over created things can exploit, pollute, and waste including this so critical commodity. I'm very concerned - there is so much need to be conserving water. More climate extremes mean more droughts, and my lament when there are downpours our cities don't have the facility to store water. Hence Auckland when droughts occur there's need to draw water from the Waikato river.

A prayer in our Eucharist service expresses the essential nature of water: 'We thank you God for your love in all creation, especially for your gift of water to sustain, refresh and cleanse all life'. Its importance has been further emphasised by the importance of cleanliness in the context of COVID-19.

Thus, there is a further link with the verses, of Genesis 1 and I note after the action of God in creating, 'And God saw that it was good.'

2) That brings me to a further dimension about water. I believe we need to come to an appreciation and attitude that water has *spiritual qualities*.

I note other cultures including Maori place a *spiritual aspect on water*. In their history one might expect that – for survival. Water is valued, and hence it may be regarded as having spiritual qualities. One very good example is the Waikoropupu springs out of Takaka in Golden Bay, with clear pure water welling up. Thus, may I remind us water has practical use as well as spiritual value. I remember a time when I was called on to bless the land, and shared this with the local Maori, who especially wanted to bless the water. I understand too they consider it to have healing qualities.

You may be aware of the significant speech of the Native American Chief Seattle in 1854 when white settlers were acquiring land. 'This Earth is Precious' and he affirms 'You must remember and teach our children the rivers are our brothers (and sisters) and give the rivers your kindness...'

Furthermore, great civilisations have thrived by being near waterways, take Egypt with Nile and Babylon in the Tigris Euphrates valley. I'm reminded too of those great aqueducts built by the Romans to convey water to their cities.

Most importantly it's in Christian belief for us to be aware. For us also there is a *spiritual dimension* to water. And we need to take account of it as we value water. It's well expressed in the prayer in our service: '*Christ is the living water, cleansing, refreshing, making all things new.*'

Remember the encounter of Jesus with the woman at the well, here Jesus spiritualises it as the heart of who he is – calling it '*living water*' – everyone who drinks of it will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. Further reason to value and conserve and keep pure. Remember the words of the hymn: 'whence the healing stream doth flow....' That derives from the experience of the Hebrews in the desert as recorded in Exodus (17.6). Here the water had both practical - quenching people's thirst and the healing aspect of a provider God who cared for them to survive the journey. May I pose the question 'what would it look like if we valued water for not only sustenance but also having spiritual qualities? How would it alter our conservation, our determination for its purity as against allowing it for runoff of agricultural chemicals, and for drainage of waste products? Note the amount of floating plastic around our inlets and along our rivers. How much we need to respect it and realise it is critical for life on the Planet? We might note the present government resolve to clean up rivers, lakes and inlets. Surely a positive.

3) As I come now to the 3rd aspect. It's about what a friend describes as '*our precious planet*'. There's a critical warning of Earth's future I keep reading about in recent New Scientists. A recent article brought this home to me of the Universe: 'Is anyone out there? The article suggests that given the proliferation of life on Planet Earth there surely is life in worlds distant and exoplanets in a 'goldilocks zone, not too hot or too cold. The answer is yes, it is likely. But whether there is *intelligent* life is quite a different proposition. Certainly, the SETI Search for intelligent life has drawn a blank. For all our telescopes and radio technology have advanced, humans have so far been unsuccessful in making contact. There are 3 factors at least that may account for this – the Drake equation, Fermi's paradox, and the makeup of 'intelligent life.'

Let me briefly explain, Astronomer Frank Drake in 1961 drew up variables that might suggest intelligent life exists, but since there's been no contact with aliens, we don't know what is needed to make that contact. 2nd Fermi was an Italian astronomer and 'Fermi's paradox is that despite the numbers – billions of stars – in our Milky Way galaxy, and more beyond, distances are so vast it would be pure 'luck' that there exists another with intelligent life in our own time but being at least 17,000 light years away it would take 17,000 years to reach it and the same to get the message back. Based on the communication in the speed of light it would take 20,000 years for a spacecraft to cover 1 light year. In other words, the chances of contact are minimal.

And 3^{rdly} as we look at proliferation of life on our planet there must be life elsewhere. But as we consider intelligent life as it has developed on our own planet it took a long time to develop – biologists believe the first 300 billion years of life on Planet Earth comprised single celled microbes. Evolution takes time – after all, fish have been around for 450 million years, and they're still fish. Intelligent life as we know it in humans has only been around some 10,000 years. That's so infinitesimally small in the context of space and distance in the cosmos.

So where does this leave us? For me it affirms the miracle working of a *creator God*, that there is intelligent life on Planet Earth. For sure God saw what he had made, and it was good.' Many factors in the universe militate against this development, as for example dangerous cosmic rays and thankfully earth is protected from most of them. Furthermore, in the divine purpose humans are able to survive, to live, to care, to think, and believe. I'm in awe. If we can assume we are given dominion, I prefer having *responsibility* then our work is self-evident. We can be with Attenborough stating we are in an emergency, to work towards survival of the Planet.

Finally, then, connecting baptism to the cosmos, this action links us as *partners* with the divine. What incredible privilege. Fresh water is not in great abundance on the Planet which is all the more why we should treat it as sacred and seek to conserve it. May I remind you also of Jesus' commission in Mark's gospel go to 'preach the good news to the *cosmos*.' The 'good news' will be our responding to this challenge.