

Sermon to St James' Church, King Street, Sydney

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Rector of St James

First Sunday after Epiphany

'The Baptism of Jesus'

13 January 2019

Readings: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; Luke 3:15-22.

'You are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased' (Luke 3:22)

When we talk of God, we tend to use symbols, images, allegories and stories. Indeed, this is what Jesus himself did in calling God 'Father' and also what he did through the use of parables (or stories) to teach and describe the nature of God's activity in the world. Moreover, in the parables, symbolic language was used by Jesus to invert the common perceptions about the nature of the world; reversing the dominant ideas of power and status and challenging his listeners regarding their views of the world.

Beginnings

A little under three weeks ago we celebrated the birth of Jesus. There is beauty in the account of the nativity – the stable, the animals and shepherds; but rightly understood, this is also a disturbing story of poverty, marginalisation, fear, asylum, abuse of power, death of innocent children, and political turmoil. In the face of this, we nevertheless know that creative and life-changing events often have tense and chaotic beginnings before ultimately finding order and stability.

For example, bringing life into the world and nurturing it is probably the most creative thing that we can do as human beings. It gives us some god-like qualities; yet, it begins with the pain and vulnerability of birth, continues through the frustrations and fears of growth, until it ultimately arrives at the flourishing that comes with maturity and personal responsibility for engagement with the wider world.

The birth of a baby also gives rise to numerous expectations about the child including the set of 'possibilities' that will go on to develop through its life. Moreover, a birth is never an individual or isolated event for it involves parents, a family and the wider community as all participate in the development of the growing child. As an African proverb states: "it takes a village to raise a child".

In a similar way, the story of Jesus from his birth to death and beyond to resurrection and new life is one that encapsulates the creative processes of God worked out in a community. It includes movement from chaos to order, as well as the redemptive and restorative activities of God in the world and in each person through the Holy Spirit.

Transformation

In this way, we describe a process of transformation that serves as a metaphor for the creative processes of God in the world. Yet, on the other hand, the destructive processes going on both in we ourselves and in the world are signs of God's absence, and of the dominance of human sin and evil that seeks to destroy what is good. Unsurprisingly, the usual motivations for such sin are selfishness, a desire for power and control, and a covetousness for wealth, possessions and status. The warning is; follow these things, and the soul will tend to degenerate rather than regenerate.

Transformation is dependent upon our overcoming these destructive forces and instead taking on the Godly ones of faith, hope and love. It involves our turning away from self-centeredness and opening ourselves to God's presence, which we call the Holy Spirit. It involves our seeking the creative activity of God both within ourselves and in our community. It is in this way that we come to see creativity as a spiritual activity releasing something of God's presence within us and helping us to satisfy a longing for meaning, hope and belonging.

In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Peter and John pray for some Samaritans to 'receive the Holy Spirit'. This action describes a group of people who knew about Jesus but who were yet to understand and accept the transformative Spirit of God that was present within them.

Likewise, the Gospel reading made a distinction between the baptism of John, which was about repentance or turning back to God, and the baptism of Jesus that was about receiving God's Spirit. Reception of the Spirit was demonstrated at the baptism of Jesus when he heard the voice of God saying: "you are my son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased". Such symbolic language ushered in a new way of understanding the relationship between God and humanity; for we, like Jesus, are adopted as sons and daughters of God – an important revelation in the mystery of the Christian faith.

Creativity

The symbolic language of faith therefore has a capacity to express mystery in a way that ordinary written and spoken words cannot. Indeed, symbolism bypasses the divisive matters of hard-edged definition and conflict over the value of particular ideas and associated claims to absolute truth. Like the parables of Jesus, symbolism upends the so-called 'natural order' of power and control, thereby giving us the opportunity for our eyes to be opened to see something new.

This is also the creative work of the artist (and the musician) – which is to present the world and reveal something profound about it in a new way. In the Christian narrative, this creative spirit is described as being endowed upon humanity by God. To be sure, it is part of what theologians call the ‘*imago dei*’, which is the idea that we are created in the image of God.

This occurs because of the Spirit of God is within us and has the capacity to enlighten, create and transform. In other words, the idea of God being present in humanity is part of an on-going creative act by God; but it is not done alone. We engage with God in community and over time – it is therefore both social and historical. Which brings us to the activity of God’s people, and especially worship.

Mystery

Worship is the communal recognition of God’s presence in the world and a reminder of our responsibilities in the light of this. It is here that we approach the mystery of God, conveyed in the great narrative of God’s people down through time. Music has always played a most important part in the communication of this mystery.

Indeed, the church cannot avoid the experience of music in all its shapes and forms, for we know that music is one of the most powerful and effective means of communication that we have. Part of the mystery of music is its ability to impart meaning, often without words; or when words are used, by having the capacity to bring greater meaning. Music, as with all art, is a way of communicating something of the mystery of life - it is a spiritual thing.

It is for this reason, here at St James, that we have these annual orchestral masses, for they help us to recognise the creative and socio-historical nature of our faith as expressed through music down through time. The baroque music, such that we hear today, is a great favourite in the repertoire and has the capacity to help us transcend the mundane so that we can enter the eternal, if only for a while on Sunday morning.

Today we combine the means of music with the theological mystery of God’s presence in humanity – a mystery celebrated at Baptism. It reminds us that we are to treat one another as if each were Christ him or herself; indeed, that we are brothers and sisters in Christ because the spirit of God is present within each of us. We are therefore called to love one another.

It is for this reason that the church must not exclude people or behave like a religious club. Instead, it has a responsibility to reach out and show hospitality, to educate, to care for others, and to seek justice for the poor, the marginalised, the persecuted and the refugee. We do this because each person carries the image of God – an important aspect of the mystery of the relationship between God and humanity; and yet another spiritual inversion of what might be considered the ‘*natural order of things*’.