

Everything comes from Nothing

a sermon preached on

The Baptism of our Lord

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lecton: Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11

Despite its being largely domesticated, baptism is actually a wild sign. Our Baptist and 'non-conformist' sisters and brothers have a more faithful grasp of this – the symbol of being fully immersed in the waters of a font is a much more accurate representation of baptism's intent. Certainly, polite and handsome little Anglican tea cups, mostly dry and dusty, or repository for flowers or even collection bowls, are hopelessly inadequate signs. It could even be argued that Anglican tea-cup fonts are dangerously misleading. There is, after all, absolutely no chance of drowning in such a puny and tamed symbol - in the worst examples you'd be hard pressed to drown a rat!

For the waters of the font should point us clearly and unambiguously to that wild terrain outside Jerusalem where John the Baptiser called people to repentance. The font should recall us to that treacherous and stormy sea which so terrified the disciples that they were convinced they would perish, and to that impetuous disciple Peter who at first walked to Jesus, as invited, before succumbing to fear and sinking into the waves. The font is there to remind us of the desperate and tired disciples who have fished all night and caught nothing, yet, in accordance with Jesus' command, draw up 153 very large fish in the place where they were convinced there were none.

From deeper into our history the font recalls us to the crossing of the Jordan into the Promised Land, the parting of the Red Sea which liberated from Egypt's slavery, the obliteration of all but Noah and the ark from the flood. In fact, if we delve far enough back, as our first reading today reminds us, we can see that the font also gestures towards the very beginning, to that dark watery chaos which was the pre-condition of creation: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters."¹ We may be so familiar with these first two verses of the Bible that we no longer notice the enormity and the shock of what these humble few words point towards – formless void, darkness, deep. This is not sweet religious bliss or comfortable success philosophies! This ancient Jewish insight, drawing upon other ancient religious world views, most notably the Babylonian creation stories, makes the shocking claim that creation arises out of nothingness, from an unfathomable deep, from formlessness and nothingness, from darkness, a deep and terrifying and dazzling darkness. As the Psalmist in prayer and reverence and awe intuited, "for darkness is as light to you."²

Here we have the opposite of much that passes for religion and spirituality. The primal experience is not the blissful light, the cheery comfort, the wishful thinking which we find so attractive. The primal experience is darkness, nothingness, an unfathomable deep which is rightly called the Abyss. The primal experience is a profound darkness. The primal experience is a sense of absolute no-thing. The primal experience is the Abyss.

Of course, on this Feast of the Baptism of Our Lord it is the experience of Jesus to which our attention is primarily drawn. The gospel writers tell us very little about that experience, and certainly nothing about being swallowed up in the water. However, when the baptism is not isolated from the whole of the gospel, and especially from the temptations and the crucifixion, it is clear that an experience of absolute darkness, an annihilating nothingness, a vast Abyss is precisely what the evangelists intuited about the experience of

¹ Genesis 1:1-2

² Psalm 139:12

Jesus. The primal experience of Jesus' experience is profound darkness, a sense of absolute nothing, a terrifying Abyss. Everything comes from No-thing. Dazzling light explodes in absolute darkness. The new creation, bursts forth from unfathomable Abyss.

This is the baptism of Jesus. This is the baptism into which we enter, which is why the baptismal liturgy speaks of the 'deep waters of death' which delivers us from sin and from which new life emerges. What makes this *εὐαγγέλιον* gospel is that it defies the 'common sense' of the world. Not that it confirms conventional wisdom about how to get on in relationships and business, but that it subverts conventional wisdom. Everything comes from No-thing. Dazzling light explodes in absolute darkness. The new creation bursts forth from this unfathomable Abyss.

If all this be true, then there are (at least) three significant consequences for the baptised.

Firstly, it goes without saying that this is, in truth, a most un-popular idea, for who would want to experience nothingness, absolute darkness, unfathomable Abyss! Not surprisingly, we attempt to deny this fundamental reality, because we are very afraid that, like the astronomers' 'black holes' and Einstein's 'worm holes' we might be sucked into oblivion and disappear. We would gladly do anything to avoid the feelings which the No-thing, the darkness, the Abyss produce in us. It ought not surprise us that this is not a saleable and marketable religious product!

The second is that all our tradition's language about repelling darkness and the defeat of darkness needs to be set alongside this equally-central declaration of the gospel. Since everything emerges from no-thing, since light only emanates from darkness, since new creation arises from Abyss, then these are not realities which can be repressed or denied safely. Indeed, much destruction, individually and collectively, is the consequence of individuals and nations alike repressing the reality of the nothing, the darkness, the Abyss.

Thirdly, whatever we mean in our talk about being 'baptised in the Spirit' it must take account of the reality of that Spirit who creates only by hovering over the face of the deep, the overshadowing Spirit familiar to Mary and to the disciples.³

So the gospel is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive precisely because it declares that which the logic of the world cannot abide – our own very personal experience of nothingness, of darkness, and of a terrifying Abyss which feels like it will annihilate us is precisely the origin and source and dynamo of the truest and most creative life we can ever know. The gospel is 'gospel' because it declares that from out of our experience of No-thing comes the everything, from our own darkness comes the Light, from the Abyssal depths comes the new creation.

This is why on this first Sunday after the Epiphany of Our Lord we gathered at the font and have been sprinkled with the waters of our birth. The Font stands at the entrance – or near to it – brimming with waters with which we may mark ourselves in the sign of Christ every time we enter here for this very purpose. By this astonishing and dangerous and miraculous sign we are recalled, in the midst of whatever state of heart and mind we may find ourselves, to the truth of our very being. Despite our fear of being No-thing, God creates everything in us. Despite our fear of our darkness, God creates dazzling light in us. Despite our terror of the wild Abyss, God fashions the new creation in us.

Thanks be to God!

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