

THE BAPTISM OF OUR LORD 7 January 2018

In 1970, while I was a monk in Brisbane, I went by ferry to Stradbroke Island to check where my religious order had begun and failed as the first Catholic Mission to the Aborigines in 1843. There, I met Auntie Kath Walker, Oogeroo Noonuccal, at Moongalpa. Kath pointed to a shell midden which she estimated was 20,000 to 40,000 years old, the deposit of countless Aboriginal feastings on shellfish. That's thousands upon thousands of years of the Children of the Dreamtime chattering, laughing, arguing, children crying, dingoes barking, fisher-folk blowing hard about the one that got away. Then came the Bjelke-Petersen era; surely now the midden has been bulldozed for a trendies' boat ramp or an unproductive coal mine.

The area of Moongalpa was fragrant still, reeking with the evocative memory of a people now gone. John the Baptist chose his pitch on Jordan Bank so well. Like Stradbroke Island, his very spot reeked with the echoes of former biblical giants and events. Here, the waters parted for Joshua to lead the end of the Exodus into the land flowing with milk and honey. Here, centuries later, the prophet Elijah was promoted to glory, raised to heaven in a chariot of fire. [2 Kings 2.11] As he rose, he let fall his prophet's mantle. Here, his prophet successor, Elisha, took up the fallen cloak, dashed it upon Jordan water, which again, parted for him to cross over to continue Elijah's work in Israel. [2 Kings 2. 14] Here, Elisha instructed Naaman [in 2 Kings 5], the Syrian army commander, to dip seven times in Jordan water to be cured of his leprous disfigurement. And, here, the Baptist, dressed as weirdly wild as Elijah and Elisha before, began to offer true believers the chance to repent of sinful ways, to change their life's direction to a godly mindset. And here, Jesus joined John, having waited thirty years because both he and John were not ready to begin their public ministry. Their spirituality had to be lived before it could be taught effectively. The pair, John and Jesus, knew that the important matters of God could be ruined by haste. Both had to daily grow, mature and ripen. Like them, we cannot write off any part of our formative life as useless, wasted, as locust eaten [Joel 1.4]. Every experience gives us an opportunity to grow; the future is contained in the present.

The Chosen people had waited 700 years for God's promise to come: *"A voice cries out in the wilderness, 'prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for God. [Isaiah 40.3] 'Speak tenderly to Jerusalem that her penalty is paid, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed in her.'"* [ibid. 2] In those years, the Chosen had survived attack, deportation, exile and return, only to find that their exile was not over; the people had become captive to keeping exactly in Israel the strictures of the old, cold, loveless letter of an outworn law. Unable to extricate themselves, they needed the message of John the Baptist, the last and most powerful prophet, who would straddle the Old and the New Testament time, to tell the people that God had become one-with-them, to tell them that God was living among them, that this God would suffer and die to save them from their sins. And this was not Good News; it was Great News!

John emerged from the blistering wilderness as a rip-snorting, compellingly powerful preacher, who spoke with irresistible authority, to challenge the people to confess the

obstacles which hindered the Lord's coming into their lives and to be baptized to cleanse it all away, to confirm the converted, to encourage the waverers, to give the sluggards a final call to bring the joy of conversion in them to fever pitch. And then John added "You think I'm good value. Wait for the coming Lord. He's fireworks! What I am doing down at the riverside in no ways compares with what he will do."

Although Jesus had no personal sin to repent, to show solidarity with the collective guilt of sin-burdened humanity, and with the disregarded, the down-trodden, the broken and excluded, Jesus joined the queue saying, "I want to be completely immersed in your world. I want to show you what God is really like."

Quite cutely, as if the Chosen were once again exiting the Red Sea at the time of the Exodus, John waded his neophytes into Jordan water, to plunge them under, to wash away any memory, any remnant of Old Egypt in them, any trace of their captivity to sin and its hold over them. Only then, they rose up to walk back to shore, back to their Promised Land as a new people.

Baptism is an outward act of complete dedication we make, an outward, joy-filled reception of God's amazing new life. Baptism is also the purifying, in-filling presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, coming continually to rescue, redeem, restore us to the very image of Jesus. You may remember in Advent 1, we read "*O! that you would tear open the heavens and come down!*" [Isaiah 64.1] And, in Advent 3, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor.*" [Isaiah 61.1] Today, the answer came. As Jesus rose from the water, the heavens were ripped open, never again to be closed to us. And the Holy Spirit descended as a gentle dove, to anoint the Messiah for mission, and a voice sounded, "*You are my Son, the Beloved. With you, I am well pleased.*" And Jesus knew he was following the divine mission and commission to save humankind. The first time a son was called "beloved", was when God stayed the knife in the hand of obedient Abraham from killing his son Isaac [Genesis 22]. A handy lamb, entangled in a bush, became the unfortunate substitute victim. But Jesus, the Lamb of God, will have to face the carrion crows of death on Calvary, with no handy lamb substitute.

In a few moments, we will renew our Baptismal promises. The sprinkling will symbolically represent our immersion in the water of God's love. This is the water of continual rebirth. *So, come on in. The water's fine!*