Mark 1:4-11 Sermon during Covid

Today we have the story of Jesus being baptised by John in the Jordan river. It’s a really short episode in Mark’s gospel, but as is typical to Mark, it is breathlessly quick and meant to feel immediate and engaging. The language begins, in a way which feels like that of Hebrew from the Old Testament, suggesting its continuity with the story of the Bible up to now; and then gives some basic facts which involve an obscure, small village in Galilee, which is suggestive of Jesus’ lowly upbringing. There are no details, just the basics in the first verse. And then suddenly, in verse 10, the grammar changes – we are invited to watch with Mark as Jesus comes up out of the water and three very important and special things take place. And it is these three we are going to explore together now. For all this, we are going to have to pay some attention to the Jewish culture and upbringing that those around would have had. So, apologies if this feels like we are jumping around a bit, but it is important.

Firstly, as Jesus is coming up out of the water the heavens are torn open. The language is a dramatic ripping and the grammar is a ‘divine passive’ which basically makes it really obvious that it is God who rips the heavens open, rather than anything natural. We might try to imagine what it looks like for the heavens to be ripped apart, but the truth is we don’t really know. What we do know, however, is that this was something which had been talked about by the prophets long ago. The best example is Isaiah chapter 64, which says:

*O that you would tear open the heavens and come down,  
    so that the mountains would quake at your presence—  
as when fire kindles brushwood  
    and the fire causes water to boil—  
to make your name known to your adversaries,  
    so that the nations might tremble at your presence!*

Here, we have the prophet’s cry that God would return to his people so that all might know their place within God’s eternal Kingdom. And in Mark’s account, we have Jesus therefore being affirmed as the one in whom God makes this return. God indeed rends the heavens and lives among his people. There is another ripping towards the end of Mark’s gospel too – in Mark 15 – where the veil, or curtain, in the temple was torn in two as Jesus died. This curtain separated humanity from God, and so by Jesus’s death, the divide between humanity and God himself was overcome. In the two ‘tearings’ in Mark’s gospel, we therefore have God tearing up heaven in order to come to his people and then God tearing apart the obstacles to God’s people approaching God.

Then, the second special thing that happens is that the Spirit descends like a dove on Jesus, and with our Jewish hats on, we immediately cast our minds back to the beginning of the Bible where in Genesis, at the beginning of the world, ‘the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.’ And again, in the prophet, Isaiah, we have references to the Spirit descending:

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,*

*and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

*2 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,*

*the spirit of wisdom and understanding,*

*the spirit of counsel and might,*

*the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

*3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

Here, the spirit of God comes down to rest on the Davidic Messiah and he is identified as the one who is wise, mighty, and full of the fear of God. It goes on to talk of his judgements, righteousness and faithfulness. As the Holy Spirit descends, we have therefore the identification of Jesus as the one on whom God’s Spirit rests. This connects Jesus with prophecies about the Messiah as one coming from King David’s line; the one who will judge with righteousness and in whom God’s Kingdom shall be brought about.

The last of the three special moments is the voice that calls from heaven, saying ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ Again, this has lots of Jewish heritage. Part of it is a quote from Psalm 2, which we don’t have time to go into fully, but where God sets up his king, calls him his son, and instructs the nations to ‘kiss him.’ There are elements here of God setting up his heavenly Kingdom by announcing his Son’s presence to the world. There are also echoes of when Abraham nearly sacrificed Isaac on a hillside in Genesis 22. In verse 2 it says, ‘Then God said, “Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.’ Without going into the Genesis story, we see here that there are parallels with the ‘beloved’ language, but also preliminary whispers of Jesus’ destiny as a sacrifice. Then there’s also a parallel with Isaiah 42:

*Here is my servant, whom I uphold,*

*my chosen, in whom my soul delights;*

*I have put my spirit upon him;*

*he will bring forth justice to the nations.*

God delights in his servant (on whom he has put his spirit), just as he is well pleased with Jesus in Mark. So here we have the idea of Jesus as servant, as well as a sacrifice, and the Davidic King, all rolling into one within a small phrase in Mark’s gospel. The servant figure in Isaiah is really significant as it is a tantalising character who keeps reappearing in Isaiah’s prophecies, always with Messianic intent, and always with suffering in mind. So the idea of Jesus as the King who brings about God’s Kingdom through his own suffering and sacrifice is something that is all brought together in these words of confirmation and affirmation from God to his Son at Jesus’ baptism.

Technical stuff over. What we learn from this short passage on the baptism of Jesus is that it is all about who Jesus is – his identity and his authority. All three of the special events that happen in succession reveal that he is essentially bringing into being God’s eternal Kingdom where God will live with his people. The heavens are ripped open and God comes to humanity, and then later, the obstacles to people approaching God are removed through Jesus’ death - a sacrifice of a suffering servant King, sent as the Messiah in the line of King David. This suffering servant King rises again, from the baptismal waters which symbolise death, and is anointed as the one who is the judge of humanity, just as he rises from the dead later and takes his place in heaven before he will come back to earth to judge us all at the end of time.

This baptism narrative is breathlessly quick, but it is packed with whispers of who Jesus is. The richness of the background leaves us with the question of who we each say Jesus is, for us. I leave you to pray about this for yourselves and trust that God will reveal himself to each of you who seek him. Amen.