

Mark 1:4-11

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

⁹In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. ¹⁰And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. ¹¹And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.' (NRSV)

I have been thinking about how we use words to describe our lives. We often use words like 'ought', 'should' and 'must'. You need to be a bit of an expert on that at the moment in order to understand the current covid-19 regulations. Some activities are illegal; some are legal but you are recommended not to do them, and some are clearly permitted, if not encouraged.

Someone once told me about an exercise that was part of a counselling course they were involved with. They were put in pairs and each of them had 2 minutes to describe a normal day in their own life to the other person. After they had done this, they reflected on the way they had described their day. In every case there was some of this:

- I have to get up at 7am to get a shower
- I need to get to work for 8.30am as I have to sort myself out before we open at 9
- I must get to school for 3pm to collect the kids.
- I have to get the tea ready for 5.30pm

Everyone used phrases like "I have to..." or "I must..."

They were then asked to describe the same day again, but instead replace "I have to..." or "I must..." with "I choose to...". Afterwards they talked about how that felt. For some, it was quite a profound experience, and in every case it prompted some reflection on whether they had all of their priorities right.

Maybe we should all try doing that. Sorry – I mean maybe we *might choose* to try that!

Our second reading today from Mark's gospel was about two cousins who chose to follow their calling to be itinerant preachers – Jesus and John. John preached a fiery message in the spirit of the prophets of old, calling people to repent – to turn around their lives – and to be baptised by him as a symbol of their change of heart. He heralds someone much greater than him, who will do something new, and that person is clearly Jesus. However, the question that has often bothered readers of this story is why did Jesus get baptised? The one person who didn't need to repent submits himself to his cousin's baptism of repentance.

Sometimes in life there are things we choose to do that we don't *have* to do. Maybe it's an act of kindness, or a phone call to keep someone in the loop, or just giving someone a little more of your time than was absolutely necessary. We wouldn't be morally failing if we didn't do them – it wouldn't be a 'sin' not to bother, but we sometimes we choose to do that extra action because it makes a difference.

I think that is what is happening here. Jesus is fully identifying himself with all of us in our broken humanity and fragility. He didn't *need* to be baptised, but he *chose* to be. It expressed that he was fully human – and

the words that come from heaven immediately afterwards express that he is also fully God. 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

It is as if Jesus is immersing himself not only in water, but in our human situation, so that we can fully identify with him. In his letters in the New Testament, Paul often used the phrase 'in Christ' to describe what a Christian is. And that's the other side of this. Jesus is fully with us, so that we can be fully with him. Irenaeus, one of the early theologians of the church, said that he became what we are, that we might become what he is.

Jesus didn't *need* to do any of this. He chose to come among us, to share our life, to immerse himself in our situation, not as an outside spectator, but as a full participant. That is what we call grace – it is in action chosen, not under compulsion, and that is how we know God loves us.

So choose well today, and remember the one who chose to be with us and to be one of us, in order that we might be with him.

Collect of the Day

Heavenly Father,
at the Jordan you revealed Jesus as your Son:
may we recognize him as our Lord
and know ourselves to be your beloved children;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Amen.