

SUNDAY 17TH JANUARY, 2021

In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending like a dove; and a voice came from heaven: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

I was reading Bruce Prewer's thoughts on this passage and was fascinated by this insight:

The question is often asked: "Why did Jesus need to be baptised?" The baptism that John the Baptist offered was: "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins". Why did Jesus get involved in that? Of what did he need to repent?

Maybe our question is one that comes from hindsight. Maybe we ask the question because we are reading the incident through spectacles tinted by centuries of doctrine and creed. For the people of his day, including the first disciples, our question may have puzzled them. They might well respond: "Why not?"

Moreover, perhaps the question would never occur to Jesus. A truly holy person is unaware of their holiness. There is no evidence that Jesus was aware of his own goodness. Remember that occasion when Jesus was called "Good Master" to which he responded: "Why do you call me good? No one is good except God." From Jesus' view point, to respond to John's call for baptism, may have seemed the only good and righteous thing to do.

What is certain, is that our question "why?" though perfectly reasonable for us to ask, was near the bottom of the priority pile as far as the gospel writers were concerned. There were more important issues. In Mark's Gospel the chief interest re the baptism of Jesus is in what happened: God affirmed Jesus. God emphatically said "YES" to Jesus.

And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending like a dove; and a voice came from heaven: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

End of Bruce Prewer's thoughts.

In western history, there is a period after the fall of the Roman Empire commonly called the Dark Ages when scholarship, scientific and social advances gave way to the domination of people by force, empire building by those in search of power. Depending on your definition of dark ages, this period lasted up to the renaissance. Sadly this is a view written by western European scholars and does not consider the advances in science and mathematics taking place during those "dark ages" in the Middle East and in Asia.

In Israel, it is suggested that there was a religious dark age. Gone were the days of the prophets. There was a time of sadness for the Jewish people. They believed the windows of heaven had been closed for centuries. They wistfully looked back to the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Miriam and Joshua, Elijah and King David,

Amos, Isaiah and Ezekiel. In their view of history, it seemed that the windows of heaven were always open in those past blessed days. But in their own time, as it had been for ages, the heavens seemed closed. There were now no great prophets, no great law givers, no charismatic liberators, no singers of new psalms. No outpouring of the Spirit, no new Word from God. It was a barren time. The heavens seemed closed and the Jews deeply mourned the continued silence. Maybe, they thought, the windows of heaven would remain shut until the golden age of the Messiah arrived.

Then Mark quotes Isaiah in verse 3 : "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for Him.'" And it is like the sleeping hunger of the Jews for God was awakened. People came from Jerusalem, from the towns and cities and from the countryside to hear the John the Baptist urging them to repent of their sins and turn to God.

John foretold the coming of Jesus "He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie."

And listen to the words of Charles John Ellicott, who was considered one of the outstanding conservative scholars of the 19th century, as he considers John's description of the baptism of Jesus.....He who cometh after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to unloose, standeth among you and ye know Him not." This is the outer sign of the Messiah's Advent, for He is already standing in their midst. Here is the answer to their question. John's work is simply ministerial. The baptism of the Spirit is at hand. The coming One has come."

The understanding here is that although John is baptising people as a symbol of repentance, he is aware that the Messiah has come. So that when Jesus turns up for baptism, John is prepared. Mark in his Gospel does not focus on John in the baptismal rite, but on the affirmation that Jesus receives from His Father: : "You are *my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*".

But let us not ignore a small phrase,: "the heavens opened". We can so easily gloss over this as the "important" bit of the spirit and the voice are what we want to know about.

One commentator put it this way: That he did not expect to look up into the sky and see a door (either big or small) opening, but something far more significant in heaven's opening. Just hold that thought for a moment.

Sometime ago, I was wandering in my garden well away from the house as dusk settled in. The evening was still. It was not a case of "oh, it's getting dark" that struck me. But a sense of the Earth breathing out as another day slipped into darkness. I felt an awareness that the creatures of the day were moving into their night time lull, while the creatures of the night were just waking to their time of toil. It was a fleeting

sensation, but one that moved me away from the everyday human vision of life to an alternate dimensional view of the world.

And this is what I feel the commentator was trying to get across in his understanding of the “heavens opened”. There was an understanding of life and religion and ritual that was known by the people of that time. They understood how things worked, who people were, and although looking forward to the coming of a Messiah, it would be sometime in the future.

So to come back to that previous thought, the heavens opened relates not to a physical apparition, but it is as though an invisible curtain that is right in front of us was suddenly pulled back. So that instead of desert and river, Jesus was standing in a new reality; an understanding of His father’s affirmation; an understanding of what He has to do.

The Gospels tell us that with Christ Jesus the heavens opened. At his baptism he saw the opening, experienced the Spirit, and heard the Word of Divine affirmation. His complete activity then becomes a testimony to the open gates of heaven. It is there for all to see: He begins the New Age of God, the age of accessibility.

And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit descending like a dove; and a voice came from heaven: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.”

The windows of heaven were opened. A transformation in who He was. No longer Joseph’s son from Nazareth, but the Son of God. We see this transformation in Jesus. In everything this incomparable Person was and did. Jesus’ life and death embody the opening of the heavens.

We see it in Christ Jesus!

His love for people,
His radical teaching as in the Sermon on the Mount,
His teasing parables.
His healing of the sick, his touching of lepers,
His table fellowship with known sinners.
His embrace of the outcaste,
His liberating of the mentally imprisoned.
His non-violent challenge to his enemies, his cleansing of the temple market.

His last supper with his friends, his emotional agony in the garden of Gethsemane.
His betrayal, arrest, night trials, and torture, his staggering to Golgotha.
His crucifixion and concern for a thief at his side, his death and burial,
and then the wonder of Easter Day and his living Presence among his disciples

The heavens are definitely open, declares the Gospel. No matter what our mood, the Spirit has come on this Jesus, and we hear the Word of God affirming this unique Person as the beloved Son.

We may not always see the open gates of heaven, but our baptism has assured us of God's affirmation! Yes He loves and wants you! We may not always feel close to God. The curtain may feel as though it has been drawn again.

BUT IT HAS NOT!

God is patiently waiting for each of us to wait on Him. Do not depend on your moods, they will swing in the wind, but stand firm in the faith.

Remember Christ's baptism where the heavens opened.
Think of your own baptism and the affirming love of God!
Know that the whole life, death and resurrection of Christ is the ground of faith, not your personal moods. Stake your life on him, not on the ebb and flow of your subjective experience.

Who are we, that the Lord of all things would care to know our name?

Because through baptism we are His!
The heavens are open!

Praise God!

Amen.