

The baptism of Jesus and hope

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 9 January 2022

A Reflection by Warren Talbot

Baptism of Jesus C

Luke 3: 15-22, Isaiah 43: 1-7

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

For a few years now, I've adopted a single word as my key word for the year. A one-word focus for what might be going on in my life.

The practice has its origins on Christmas Eve 2013 when I was rushed to the RPA, delirious with septic arthritis in my left ankle. After nearly a year, and 101 days and nights at RPA, my left leg was amputated. My key word in 2014 just had to be.... 'patience'.

In 2021 my key word was 'authenticity'. I was examining, not for the first time, aspects of my faith journey. Was I being true to myself?

Just over a week ago, walking in the Booderee National Park at Jervis Bay, I decided to have 'patience', once again, as my key word for 2022. It's partly to do with COVID... but also other things.

I'm wondering what your key word for 2022 might be? Let's pause for a moment while you think about it... For the more than 30 people joining us on Zoom this morning, you might like to type your keyword in the chat room...

Fifty-five years after the death of Jesus, if the writer of the Gospel we know as "Luke" had a key word, I suspect it might have been 'hope'. Let me explain as we examine some aspects of the Lucan account of the baptism of Jesus and the theme of hope.

As we know, the gospels are not histories or biographies. Although the baptism of Jesus is found in all four canonical gospels, that is no guarantee of literal historical truth.

Nonetheless, Biblical scholars universally believe that there is a historical core to the gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus. There must have been strong oral traditions about Jesus being drawn to the teaching and practices of John the Baptist. Maybe Jesus followed John for a time.

Many people did at the time, and some throughout the world still do. There are about 10,000 Australians who are followers of John the Baptist, known as Mandeans. Most of them live in the western suburbs of Sydney.

In Luke 3:11, a few verses earlier than what Hazel read today, John is asked a question and replies with the following words:

Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none. And whoever has food must do likewise.

Do those words sound familiar to you? Do they remind you of anyone?

Marcus Borg, and many others, suggest that the historical core of the story is supported by the idea that it would have been disconcerting for the early Christ communities to record the need for Jesus to be baptised – by John or anybody else!

John's baptism was for repentance and the forgiveness of sin. Why would Jesus, the Anointed One, need such forgiveness? It would have been all too convenient to forget this aspect of the oral traditions.

The baptismal narrative serves to remind us that Jesus was a human being, wrestling - as we all do - with a sense of identity and vocation. To use my keyword from last year, Jesus would have wrestled with their authentic self.

It is obvious that the literary forms of the Lucan account of the baptism include historical narrative and religious mythology. An important side-point for reading the Scriptures generally, is that even though the literary form might be historical narrative, we may not be reading literal history.

This is well illustrated in the selection from Luke 3, which Hazel read. We refer earlier in the liturgy to Jesus being baptised by John. But in the Lucan account John is imprisoned prior to Jesus' baptism. Very difficult if you read this as literal history to understand that point. Though Mark and Matthew do record that John baptised Jesus. Not in Luke and not in the gospel according to John.

In the first verses of chapter three, the writer is very keen to name and even date the political and religious authorities of the time: we know them all - Pontius Pilate, Herod the Tetrarch, and the high priests Annas and Caiaphas. The Lucan community, 55 years after the death of Jesus, is very conscious that Jesus' teaching about good news to the poor and liberty to the captives, would bring Jesus into conflict with the political and religious authorities of the day. Exactly as it had done for John.

The mythology in the story is pictured very well in the painting on the cover of our liturgy booklet. You might like to have another look at it. The heavens are opening, a dove is being sent, and the Holy One speaks. The theological purpose of this mythology is clear: that the life and teaching of Jesus is from God.

Using different words, Jesus re-presents Loving and Gracious Reality which we may name in different ways. In this morning's liturgy, curated by Liz Watson, this Reality has been named as the Eternal One, Great Mystery, Spirit, and the Beloved.

In the reading from the Hebrew Scriptures, read by Alison, a favourite way of speaking about loving and gracious reality for the writers of Isaiah is God as the "Holy One".

After the crucifixion of Jesus by the political and religious authorities, the followers of Jesus came to the realisation that the transforming Love and Grace they encountered in Jesus was still present with them. Love and Grace could not be - and were not - exhausted by the Cross. Love and Grace were not defeated by the brutality of Roman Imperial rulers and the Temple authorities in Jerusalem.

Using concepts and frameworks available to them they proclaimed that Christ is Risen! They evolved into Christ communities in which the Christ was alive.

Writing about 30 years earlier than the Lucan narrative, in his letter to the Romans, Paul links baptism to the symbolism of dying and rising to new Life with the Christ (6:4). Referring to faith of Abraham and Sarah, Paul refers to '*hoping against hope*' (4:18). Or in the words of Martin Luther King Junior "*We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.*"

Placed in this theological context, the Church's sacrament of baptism is not only a naming ceremony for an individual, or an initiation into a friendly religious tribe. Baptism is a sacrament of hope and joy for all. In the words of Paul, it is so that we may walk "*in the newness of life*".

The life and teaching of the baptised Jesus re-presents a promise of love and grace, of healing and compassion, which the Eternal One has made not only to Christians, but to all people, to all sentient beings, and to the creation itself.

I conclude this short reflection with the contemporary reading for today as found in our liturgy booklet. It is from one of the great biblical scholars of the past fifty years, Walter Bruggeman. In just a few words, Bruggeman presents the Christian understanding of hope.

*"Hope in gospel faith is not just a vague feeling
that things will work out,
for it is evident that things will not just work out.
Rather, hope is the conviction,
against a great deal of data,
that God is tenacious and persistent in overcoming
the deathliness of the world,
that God intends joy and peace.
Christians find compelling evidence, in the story of Jesus,
that Jesus, with great persistence and great vulnerability,
everywhere he went, turned the enmity of society
toward a new possibility,
turned the sadness of the world toward joy,
introduced a new regime where the dead are raised,
the lost are found, and the displaced are brought home again."*

The Pitt Street Uniting Church faces the many challenges of 2022 aware of our fallibility and brokenness as a community. We face 2022 conscious that “*things will not just work out*”.

But as we seek to follow the Way of Jesus the Christ,

we live together in hope.

We see the possibilities...

to turn our sadness,

to turn the sadness of the world,

to joy.

Thanks be for the Sacred Gift of Hope.

Amen.

References

Alison Boden, *Hoping Against Hope*, Princeton University Chapel, 1 March 2015.
<https://chapel.princeton.edu/news/hoping-against-hope>

Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*, (New York: Harper One, 2006).

Walter Bruggemann, *A Gospel of Hope*, compiled by Richard Floyd (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2018) (Especially pages 104, and 105).

Christiaan Mostert (Ed), *Hope: Challenging a Culture of Despair*, (Melbourne, ATF Press, 2004).