

# Beginning Beloved

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 7 January 2024

A Reflection by Rev Penny Jones

Epiphany 1 (The Baptism of Jesus)

Genesis 1: 1-5; Mark 1: 4-11

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

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May I speak in the name of God, Lover, Beloved and Love itself. Amen

Some of you may have noticed a change to our worship space today. The baby has gone – transformed it seems into a scallop shell. I am passing it around among you as I speak and I invite you to hold it for a few moments if you wish.

What strange alchemy is this, you may ask? What does this signify? We'll come back to that. For now, just be aware that we are being subtly, and not so subtly, redirected, from the outer to the inner; from the seen to the unseen; from creation to re-creation; from the incarnation to the resurrection. This is a theological progression that demands that we go back to the beginning – to the creation of light in the story of Genesis as we heard, and to the beginning of the gospel as the author of Mark proclaims it, just a couple of verses earlier than today's text, *'the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'*

Our Christian story, just like the story of our own lives, is full of new beginnings, and this is a particularly evocative one, marked in some way in all four of the canonical gospels.

For Matthew and Luke it follows their tales of the birth and childhood of Jesus; for John it follows the Prologue that tells of *'light coming into the world'* recapitulating the first creation story; but for the author of Mark, whose account we will follow most closely in our church calendar this year, it is *'the beginning'*. For Mark nothing happens without the baptism – and indeed up to that point Jesus has not said or done anything at all.

**Baptism** – that's the first meaning of the scallop shell – you can see the symbol here also on my stole. From at least the twelfth century (once sprinkling became the norm for baptism rather than full immersion) scallop shells have been used. The scallop shell here today reminds us of the baptism of Jesus, but even more so of our own baptisms and of the baptisms of all those who have been baptised down the centuries, with whom we are connected in that great river of light sometimes called the communion of saints.

The shell is tangible, fragile yet strong, a reminder simultaneously of life and mortality. The shell takes us back to our physical beginnings as a species in the oceans; and it takes us back – as it took Jesus to our beginning place as *'the beloved'* of God.

For nothing – absolutely nothing of Jesus earthly ministry takes place, until they hear and know *'you are my Beloved, my own'*. This is the beginning place for Jesus, as for us. We begin our spiritual journey beloved, or we cannot begin at all – though it will take us a lifetime to live into that essential beloved-ness.

The Church as institution down the centuries has of course weaponised baptism as it has weaponised much else as an instrument of power and control. Only these people may be baptised; only these people are really well prepared and knowledgeable; only these people are morally worthy; only these people are sufficiently like us to belong; only these people measure up to our standards or respectability.

Well Jesus's baptism certainly wasn't respectable. He had to go out to the wilderness to be baptised. Why? Because John was a revolutionary freedom fighter – some parts of our political world today would call him a terrorist. His message and his actions would not have been welcome in synagogue or temple, leave alone forum. John was a troublemaker and to be baptised by him was to ally yourself with him – and this is what Jesus did. But there's no suggestion that he needed to have earned his place among the freedom fighters either.

At this point Jesus had lived thirty years and done and said nothing worthy of baptism. Baptism, then and now, was a free gift of grace, open to all.

When, in the Acts of the Apostles, the Ethiopian eunuch says to Philip, *'Here's water, what is to prevent me from being baptised?'*, he was probably expecting an answer along the lines of *'well I'm sorry but you're not a Jew, and you're a eunuch and you definitely haven't read and understood the law and the prophets – and, well, basically 'no' or at least 'not yet' – maybe come back when you've done a course or three and maybe married a nice Jewish girl, and even then frankly your genitals are never going to do....'* But he was baptised. He began again, beloved.

Now baptisms have sometimes been an *'end of earthly journey'* matter, as the early centuries in particular struggled with the fear of eternal damnation and people tried to ensure that they died in a state of grace. But this is to misunderstand. We begin in baptism, so that we know ourselves beloved, and journey always in the light of that beloved-ness through whatever life brings. We are being continually baptised, moment by moment and hour by hour in the ocean of God's love. And the scallop shell, that reminds us of that ongoing inner baptism, becomes a reminder then of our earthly pilgrimage.

**Pilgrimage** – that's a second meaning of the scallop shell, that we'll explore a bit today, and much more through the season of Lent, which begins this year on Valentine's Day – how appropriate, the feast day of being beloved!

For we – as the Basis of Union proclaims – are *'pilgrims on the way'* and pilgrimage is inherent to our Christian way of life. The scallop shell has for centuries been the symbol of the pilgrim, and very strongly associated with the great pilgrimage routes across Europe to Santiago de Compostela. The origins of this association are lost in a multiplicity of legends, mostly surrounding St James whose earthly remains were believed to have washed up on the beach in Galicia covered in scallop shells.

Subsequent interpretation holds that the lines on the shell signify the different routes travelled by pilgrims from all around the world which all lead to the supposed tomb of St James in Santiago de Compostela.

The symbol is used to mark the route and pilgrims carry a scallop shell to indicate to others that they are sharing in the pilgrimage. Some of you will I am sure have walked your own Camino along one of these pilgrimage trails, and I look forward to hearing your stories of that journey.

Those who undertake physical pilgrimages – and these are very popular in our own era – test themselves in various ways – physical in terms of endurance of distance, wind and weather; emotional as they leave behind familiar supports of family and friends; spiritual as they encounter in the silence and solitude of such a lengthy walk the clamour of ego in various forms. It is a voluntary embracing of both outer and inner turmoil, for the sake of growth.

As David Whyte puts it, *pilgrimage is about the dance between inner and outer storms*, and

*“Walking the pilgrim edge between the two, holding them together, is the hardest place to stay, to breathe both, and make a world of both, and to be active in their exchange: inhabiting a world of luminosity and intensity, subject to the wind and the weather, surrounded by the music of existence; a rehearsal in fact for the act of dying, a place where inside and outside can reverse and flow with no fixed form.”*

To embrace such a pilgrimage does not necessarily require us to leave home.

As John O’Donohue points out

*“At its heart, the journey of each life is a pilgrimage through unforeseen sacred places that enlarge and enrich the soul”* and our pilgrimage may be as much inner as it is outer. Yet the scallop shell reminds us that each day is a new beginning on the pilgrimage of life and faith – a pilgrimage that has at its heart the purpose of transformation – the third and final meaning of the scallop shell to which we will attend today.

**Transformation** – scallop shells carry within them symbolism of rebirth and renewal. Some have interpreted them as representing the moon and the human eye, signifying both cycles of dying and rising, and spiritual awakening. In a few short weeks we will come once again to Holy Week and Easter, and to the great drama of dying and rising that lies at the heart of our faith.

The presence of our scallop shell here today reminds us that those who are baptised into Christ, as Paul wrote, are baptised into their death – into their dying and rising – and it is through this transformative process that we are united once again with the ocean of Love from which we come and to which we are constantly returning.

Like the shell, we are tumbled in the waves of that Love throughout our earthly pilgrimage. For this is the transformative process whereby we come gradually to recognise more and more our original beloved-ness.

For like Jesus at their baptism, we begin beloved. We travel the pathways of our earthly pilgrimage as beloved – even when amid outer and inner storms, we cannot see or feel the truth of that. And ultimately, we are transformed into that Love from which nothing can separate us.

It is perhaps not easy to move from the Christ child to the shell – to let go, it seems so quickly, of the comfort of a beloved human face. The shell may seem too hard edged, too fragile, too cold to the touch. There is a loss of innocence and a demand for a more grown-up faith inherent in the exchange.

Yet here in all simplicity is an invitation to take the next steps of our journey – to remember that we begin beloved; and that amid all the storms of our earthly pilgrimage we can flow in the ocean of that Love which is transforming us atom by atom into the Beloved.

So with the scallop shell to guide us on the way, and in the company of all who have travelled and will travel this path, let us begin again, beloved.

Amen