

Washed in awe and wonder

Scripture Readings

Genesis 1:1-1-5

Acts 19:1-7

Mark 1:4-11 (prayer – my the mediations of my heart...be acceptable to you)

We could spend the whole day on Genesis. In fact, that would be a luxury to hide in arcane studies, in textual examination and a deep theological exploration of what God was thinking

but then that ignores the headlines

and the other threads in this week's gospel readings, epiphany, awe, wonder, Baptism and courage that gives us. And we are the beginning of a new year – a new era. 2021 sounds like science fiction to me. Who ever thought we'd be here? I honestly don't know where to start.

Perhaps at the beginning – in the time before time - separating the light from the dark.

God saw that the light was good and he separated the light from the darkness. Georgia voted to change the balance of power. We are at the beginning of a new year. The light can bathe us and wash the old year away. A vaccine is dawning.

And in the dark sits the children we haven't held; the funerals we haven't attended, the friends we miss so much. But light comes out of the darkness. God saw that it was good and he separated it from the darkness. That means that birth (of new ideas; new eras; new discoveries) comes out of the dark. The dark could also be innocence or ignorance revealed by the light: COVID is real. Jesus came to save us. Science is imperfect but ever-thirsting.

Transition. I love a beautiful sunset but I have to confess, the setting is always melancholy for me. The end of a day can be awesome but always seems sad. A new dawn is always full of wonder, no matter how it reveals itself.

I think we should be mindful and honour the setting of the year. I hope we greet the new one with wonder and curiosity.

Wednesday was epiphany. The Magi/ astronomers ¹ travelled through the night – called by the prophesies and a light in the sky. Significantly, they were ready to be awed. They brought gifts for whom they were to meet. Brought there by night:

- the gift of Gold for royalty for He who leads and reigns.
- the gift of frankincense - an essential scent for worship
- and Myrrh, the spice for refreshing the dead; a portent of what's to come.

But most noticeably – as I have said again and again – right from the very beginning - unlikely messengers. Who were the first to be called by God to recognise Jesus? Who travelled day and night on a star, a promise, a prophesy? The educated foreigners. Not Romans; not the children of Israel – 3 men from faraway lands, strangers. Unexpected, unlikely messengers.

Out of the night on bended knee, they welcomed the child with awe and wonder. Were they bathed in the moonlight's spirit? Light in the darkness: a star.

And here, I digress, as you know I would. This week I read about what psychologists call the 'overview effect'. Captain Jim Newall was in Apollo 8 on Christmas Eve 1968. He put his finger to the porthole and covered the tiny blue planet and he said he 'realised how insignificant we are with everything I have ever known behind my thumb.' Neil Armstrong did the same thing. He said he didn't feel like a giant when he covered the earth with his thumb. He felt very, very small.

Since then, hundreds of humans have been shot into space and they have all report the same reaction. They are transformed, inspired, humbled and they return with permanently widened eyes. They speak of elation, bliss and transcendence. ² The experts say the Overview Effect turns astronauts into evangelists preaching the gospel of orbit, of saving the planet, human kindness and seeking wisdom. They are full of wonder for this fragile planet. And it is reported, they endure 'a lingering euphoria that results in a permanent change of perspective'. Awe.

It seems that feeling tiny makes us better humans.

¹ See Advent sermon

² Baird, Julia, (2020), *Phosphorescence*, chapter 5

Paul asks, 'did you receive the Holy Spirit?', No, they replied and he asked then 'what baptism did you receive?' And the Corinthians say 'John's baptism' – Paul said that was a Baptism of repentance ...'

Repentance – in English, we have that word dripping in guilt. But in Greek, Metanoia, means change your mind or more importantly, change how you see things. Meta – bigger than us. There are probably a lot of people in America who need to change how they see things right now. Paul re-baptised the 12 Corinthians and they went deeper into their faith, closer to God. He laid his hands upon them and the Holy Spirit came touched them. They were changed as the astronauts were changed.

Has there been something in the last year that made us change our minds? Perhaps we've changed our ideas on what is community; what is family; what is important; what is not? How many times have you clung to family and thought, how grateful we are to live in Merimbula, in Australia? Not smug, just thankful like never before.

The rain over the last few weeks has been a baptism. It is washing away the grime. The dust from the fires is settling and the earth is taking a deep drink. We start the new year with our tanks and dams full.

Genesis reminds us that before time, before form – there was dark and now there's light. Our world is divided into 'before' times: before marriage; before children; before retirement and before COVID. We are reminded that there was a different world before humankind and before Jesus. Somehow the world changed between the before and after.

Baptism washes away the old, the regrets, the transgressions. It was a long-standing Jewish tradition which is why Jesus approach John to be baptised. Rabbis and lay leaders cleansed before any spiritual work. Brides and grooms had a ritual cleansing before marriage. It allowed a person to rise from the waters refreshed, renewed and acceptable to God's work.

Imagine Jesus moving forward in the crowd, eager. Can you smell the green, muddy scent of inland water? Can you see the sun sparkling off the murky surface? Can you hear John's breath draw suddenly as he recognises Jesus in from of him?

Jesus went to the water to be bathed in forgiveness and he rose from the water changed. That's when He knew his calling – what he needed to do. And that changed the world.

And the voice from the heavens said to Jesus, as He says to you – **you are my child, whom I love; with you I am best pleased.**

When you are vulnerable and naked, I will make you strong. Your baptism is awash in awe and wonder. It is strength from within and strength from something bigger than you. A cloak of security and belonging. A reminder that you, tiny you, ordinary you, are loved.

The rain has stopped. The sun has come out. We have been bathed again. We emerge from the shower and from last year with new growth, fresh flowers and new ideas. How amazing. We are awash in awe and wonder. Maybe we have to feel tiny to feel God's love.

John O'Donohue finished his year with the prayer ending with, "...we bless this year for all we have learned, for all we have loved and lost And for the quiet way it has brought us nearer to our invisible destination". Amen

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