

Year B

Mark 1:4-11

The Boston Globe, which carries a daily column designed to answer readers' queries, listed the top ten unanswerable questions. Here's one: "I am nine years of age and have a cat that eats regularly and needs to go on a diet. He also eats mice when he is out. How many calories in a mouse?"

Our Gospel text today raises at least three big questions which seem to be as unanswerable as that one. Why did Jesus need to undergo a baptism of repentance

when we understand him to be without sin? Did God adopt Jesus as his Son at the point of baptism? How can the Holy Spirit 'proceed from the Father and the Son' as is stated in the Nicene Creed when clearly the Spirit descended upon him at his baptism? There's enough there to keep us going for the rest of the year. In fact, there's enough there to keep us occupied for a lifetime! And you may be relieved to hear that I'm not going to dwell specifically on any of these questions today but instead I'm going to attempt an all encompassing answer that takes us away from the nitty gritty theological arguments

and presents us with a way to practice and live which embraces the questions and makes sense of them in who we are and what we are becoming.

I was speaking to a minister recently from a different church tradition from ours who was telling me that he and his congregation don't do liturgy. I was intrigued by that statement and I asked him to explain what he meant. Well, he said, we just have times of worship and we sing whatever the Spirit puts on our hearts and when we pray we just make it up on the spot because then we know that it's Spirit led and when I preach I just have a few

headings on a piece of paper because I want to be open to how the Spirit will lead me when I preach. We have Communion every week but I'm thinking of cutting back on that because it's getting very repetitive and we remember Jesus' death every week in different ways anyway.....

I used to enjoy debating with other Christians about such things but now I tend not to, unless asked a direct question. So I didn't respond to his explanation and we moved on to something else. But I will tell you what I was thinking when he was describing his church's practice and the brief

rationale behind it. I was thinking the word: LITURGY. For my friend in his supposed rejection of liturgy was in fact, unwittingly, embracing liturgy. Liturgy simply refers to the words, actions and signs that we perform in the course of worship. Every church is liturgical because every church engages in worship and as the human and the divine meet they do so in the only way that can make any sense to human beings: in words, actions and signs. It's fascinating that those churches that reject a sacramental understanding of the ordinances of the Christian Church, baptism and the Lord's

Supper, replace them with other sacramental rituals, which will often come under the umbrella term, 'the blessings of the Spirit', whether that is in what is sung, what is prayed and proclaimed, and what is experienced. I grew up in the Church renewal movement of the 1970s that was influenced to a great extent by the latest fads to emerge from across the Atlantic. I remember very well the arrival in this country of John Wimber and his disciples from California who emphasised the availability of the power of God in Christian living - to access this power Christians

needed to be open to a special anointing which came through the laying on of hands. To a young, impressionable Christian it sounded great: a special blessing that came through the laying on of hands. If only someone wise had taken me aside and explained about my baptism it would have saved a journey down a lot of wrong roads. You see, we all crave the presence of Jesus Christ and we hope and expect our liturgy to enable us to meet with him. Furthermore, as our text in Mark's Gospel indicates today, we meet with him in the sacraments, as baptism is in view particularly, and if we

don't teach the sacraments and practise them then people will make their own up. That's the extent of our human longing for God.

So, what about this baptism event. It's described in an incredible way by Mark. He wrote that Jesus witnessed the heavens being torn apart as he rose out of the water. Here was heaven and earth transparent to one another. Mark, later in his Gospel, described the mountaintop experience of Jesus and some of his disciples in a similar manner when Jesus was transfigured and a voice was audible from the heavens. Then

towards the end of the Gospel account we read of the Temple curtain being torn apart at the point of Jesus death. These were moments when heaven and earth were transparent to one another. These were sacramental moments; moments full of life changing meaning for those who experienced them.

Jesus arrived at the Jordan and was baptised by John in it. He didn't need to undergo a baptism of repentance for his own sake but he chose to do so because he wished to identify absolutely and totally with us in our condition. Here was God drawing

as near as he possibly could, to humanity in its need. And in so doing we are invited to follow his way. John stated that he baptised with water but Jesus will baptise with the Holy Spirit. Every time a precious human being stands or is presented at the front of the church to receive the water of baptism, so he or she receives the Spirit of Christ. For that is the place where heaven and earth are transparent to one another. Baptism is only ever experienced once; it cannot be legitimately repeated. It is the rite of initiation into the body of Christ; into his Church. So we do not look to baptism again

for that unique meeting of heaven and earth but instead to the Sacrament of Holy Communion, for the presence of Christ is always mediated through material, through real water, real bread and real wine.

Jesus arrival on the scene of Mark's narrative is described liturgically. Here we have the Son meeting with the Father through the Spirit before those who are witnesses and therefore participants in this act of worship. And this is life; the real life of the Son of God of which we are invited to participate in. We must not neglect the

Sacraments which are the means by which we know the real presence of the living Lord.

A golfer who had been playing badly went to a psychiatrist who told him to relax by playing a round of golf without a ball. "Do everything you would normally do, but use an imaginary ball," advised the psychiatrist."

The golfer tried it the next day. He stepped up on the first tee, imagined he hit a 260-yard drive, made a fine approach shot to the green, then putted for a par.

The round went splendidly and as he approached the 18th hole, he met another golfer playing the same way--no ball. The

other golfer had seen the same psychiatrist. They decided to play the last hole together and bet £10 on the outcome. The first golfer swung at his imaginary ball and announced that it had gone 280 yards right down the middle of the fairway. The second golfer matched his drive. The first fellow then took out his 5-iron and after swinging at his imaginary ball, he exclaimed, "Look at that shot! It went right over the pin and the reverse spin on it brought it right back into the hole! I win." "No you don't," said the second golfer. "You hit my ball."¹

¹ Bits and Pieces, February, 1990, p. 16.

It is possible to make up any number of sacramental alternatives to what Jesus has offered to us. But to do so is a bit like playing that round of golf with an imaginary ball. We can thoroughly enjoy it but in the end we are left empty and unsatisfied by the result. It doesn't need to be that way because Jesus has provided us with all that we need to live and thrive in his abundant love.