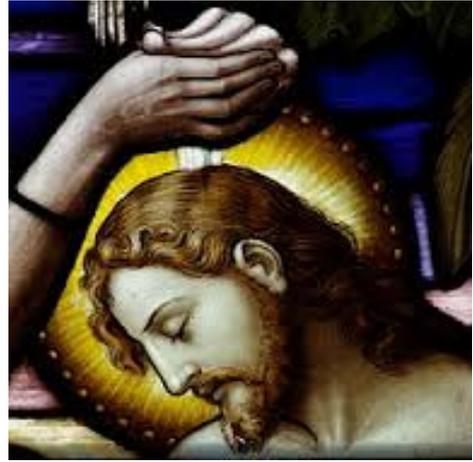


The Baptism of Jesus

At that time, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. The moment he came out of the water, he saw the sky split open and God's Spirit, looking like a dove, come down on him. Along with the Spirit, a voice: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life." Mark 1, 7-11

Located in Jerusalem is an institute dedicated to the study of Scripture in its Jewish context and tradition. It is called Bat Kol, and was established by the Sisters of Zion. One of its aims is to promote Jewish-Christian dialogue. Another is to help its students to incorporate their studies, in this context, into their self-understanding as Christians. Bat Kol, literally means an echo or 'the daughter of a voice' and, in Hebrew is an expression for the voice of God. Bat Kol was the voice of God that Jesus heard when he emerged from the Jordan after being baptised by John the Baptist.



The gospel-readings over the Christmas-Epiphany period provided us with stories from Matthew and Luke about the birth and childhood of Jesus. Mark has none of these, and launches straight into an account of Jesus' adult life and the beginning of his public ministry. In his introduction, Mark is clear and to the point: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1, 1). Mark introduces Jesus as the Christ (Christos is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word Messiah) - God's anointed one, and the long-awaited deliverer of God's people.

From the outset, Mark declares that his story is good news for all those living in hope of God's deliverance. Isn't that the essential message of the Christmas story? The birth of Jesus was indeed good news for all those people living in hope. However, the way in which this Messiah is going to deliver God's people will shatter the expectations of the large majority of the Jewish people. According to Mark, Jesus did not come as a powerful warrior to expel the Roman occupiers of Israel. Moreover, he did not make his appearance among the Jewish political and religious leaders in Jerusalem, but in the Judean wilderness with the ordinary people who had come to repent and be washed by John in the waters of the Jordan. From the beginning, Mark set up a tension between what was expected of the Messiah and who Jesus really was. That tension intensified as Mark's Gospel unfolded.

Mark presented John the Baptist as a prophet whose role was to prepare his people for the arrival of the Messiah. He made it clear that the most suitable preparation was a change of mind and heart. The words Mark put into the mouth of the Baptist are borrowed directly from the prophet Isaiah, and news of the Baptist's appearance is taken from the prophet Malachi:

"Thunder in the desert! 'Prepare for God's arrival! Make the road straight and smooth, a highway fit for our God...Then God's glory will shine, and everyone will see it.'" (Isaiah 40, 3-5)

"Look! I'm sending my messenger on ahead to clear the way for me." (Malachi 3, 1)

John the Baptist knew that sin distanced people from God, so his call to repentance and forgiveness was a symbolic way of calling his people out of exile. As he went about his task of baptising people with water, he made reference to the one for whom he was preparing, stating that he would baptise with the Holy Spirit. That was the cue for Jesus to enter and ask John to baptise him. In doing so, Jesus identified himself with the ordinary people who struggled with human frailty and the ups and downs of life.

We are not told why and how Jesus made the long journey from his home-town of Nazareth to the Judean wilderness. But surely, he must have heard rumours of this unusual character who was calling people to repentance. Mark made no reference to the fact that John and Jesus were cousins, and there is no indication in Mark's story that John and Jesus actually recognised one another.

The punchline of this opening section of Mark's Gospel is what happened as Jesus emerged from the Jordan. We are told that he saw the heavens torn apart, the Spirit descending like a dove on him and that he heard a voice (Bat Kol) from heaven declaring: "You are my Son, chosen and marked by my love, pride of my life." (Mark 1, 11)

The Hebrew word for "torn apart" is *schizw*, and is used only one other time in Mark's Gospel - when he describes the temple veil being torn apart at the very moment of Jesus' death. This is Mark's symbolic way of declaring that the divide between heaven and earth has been broken and that in Jesus the power of God's love, mercy, compassion, freedom, light and forgiveness has been let loose in the world. In Jesus, God is alive and active in our world, and because of our baptism in which God's Spirit comes to dwell in us, we are meant to be agents of God in the lives of everyone we encounter. The most significant moment in our lives was when we were baptised into the Christian community.

The Spirit of God who anointed Jesus as Messiah, the Christ of God, and confirmed him in his mission to the world, also continues to hover over each of us brothers and sisters of Jesus, inviting us to continue the mission of Jesus by reaching out to the lost and alienated, healing those who are hurting, feeding the hungry, freeing those who are imprisoned by fear, doubt, depression and loneliness, and bringing peace and justice and mercy to everyone with whom we engage.

That's a tall order, but let's not forget that we, too, have God's Spirit to guide us.