

For the second week, our Gospel tells the story of the baptism of Jesus. Last week, Mark pointed out that Matthew's account was from Jesus' viewpoint (a sort of 'selfie' portrait) and that Luke's account reached out to many more people (a group photo).

This week, in John's Gospel, we have an intensely personal portrait photograph taken by John the Baptist (with a bit of post-production by John the Evangelist).

John 1v 33: *"I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, "He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."*

John is perhaps surprisingly clear in describing how the event unfolded from his experience of it. To paraphrase: I did not know it was him; God's voice pointed him out to me; I saw God's Spirit descend on him.

Imagine yourself as John for a moment. If you had heard the voice of God point someone out *and* what you believed to be the Spirit of God descend on that same person, what would *you* do? .....

Well, if had happened me, I would probably have been so gobsmacked that I couldn't do *anything* at the time (except probably grin stupidly) *nor* could I have recalled it so matter-of-factly later on. Sadly, I don't think I'd have had the *courage* to trust and to act on that intuitive conviction. Fortunately for us, John the Baptist did!

But John was no ordinary person. He had spent years as an ascetic in the wilderness; years of just thinking and praying, and learning to discern the voice of God and to do as that voice said. John was ready to receive this revelation from God about God.

On the banks of the Jordan river, John recognised that it was the *same* voice that had called him into his baptising ministry, that was now pointing out Jesus to him. *And* John recognised this event for what it really was; the culmination of John's *entire* ministry: *"I came baptising with water for this reason, that He might be revealed to Israel"* (v31). *And*, even more than that, John saw that this event was not just the culmination of *his* Ministry, it was the revealing of God's chosen Emissary to Israel.

Three big revelations are going on in this story. One is the revelation to John the Baptist of who Jesus is. The second is the revelation to Israel of Jesus. The third is the revelation to the world of how this happened, by John the Gospel writer.

Our God is a God of revelation. God does not keep the God-self secret from mankind. Throughout the Scriptures, God talks to his chosen ones, walks with them through their tribulations, acts on their behalf often *mightily* (e.g. freeing Israel from captivity in Egypt) often *prophetically* (e.g. telling of the coming Messiah) often *emphatically* (e.g. pointing out Jesus to John).

Our God is a God of revelation; *but people (including ourselves) must be receptive to receive that revelation*. John could recognise immediately God's revelation *to* him *of* Jesus. John could also recognise that the revelation of Jesus to Israel was the culmination of his ministry. Why? – Because John had spent

years in the wilderness learning to recognise the voice of God and learning to act upon it. We call that learning 'prayer'.

In the wilderness, devoid of distractions, devoid of many of the trappings of the Jewish religion, John learned to listen to the voice of God; John learned to pray. John gained enough confidence in God's revelations to him, that when the enormous revelation came to him on the banks of the Jordan river, John *knew* it was no delusion; John *knew* what to do.

I guess the learning for all of us, is to find a place without distractions (our own private wilderness) and to listen, to learn to discern the quiet promptings of God as he continues his work of revealing the God-self to us today. When we pray, we *can and should* spend more time listening than speaking. Perhaps the best advice to us all is that frequently given to me by my wife – admittedly in other circumstances – “just shut up and listen”.

There is evidence that the early church knew how to 'shut up and listen'.

The Corinthian Church, beloved of St Paul, had learned the lesson of waiting on God's revelation in prayer : *"I give thanks to my God always for you" says Paul (in 1 Cor 1v4,5,7) "because of the grace of God that has been given to you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind... so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ."* ['...eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ', as the KJV puts it].

Equipped with all of the spiritual gifts, the Corinthian church waited for revelations from God in their regular times together. They also waited for what they believed would be the early return of Jesus into their midst on the last day.

The activity of the Holy Spirit in the Corinthian Church, in the church down the ages, and in our lives today is all about revelation; revealing God to the world in which we live. *We still* wait for God's revelations to come to us all; the revelation of God to us as we listen privately in prayer, *and* the revelation to us of Christ in glory.

The snag is, that Revelation cannot be cajoled, nor earned, nor even hurried. It can only be *waited for and recognised* when it comes.

So, here's a very practical question: Do we wait in anticipation ready to recognise revelation? Or do we find something else to do in the meantime – the religious equivalent of making a cup of tea while we wait for our choice TV programme to start? We can *always* find things to do to keep us busy when we could be keeping quiet and learning to discern and act on the voice of God, as John the Baptist did. Are we patient and faithful enough to do that?

I can only answer for myself; as you can only answer for yourself. Am I patient and faithful enough to learn to recognise the voice of God in listening prayer and to learn to act upon it? [*Or*, should I just go and engage in some time-filling, worthy, ecclesiastical displacement activity? Hmmm... Tough choice!

Maybe I'll just go and put the kettle on. Any one for coffee and a nice crunchy, honey-roasted locust?