

Dear Friends,

Mark 1: 9-11

I was in the bathroom while on holiday. It was first thing in the morning and I was having a wash. The mirror in front of me was larger than the one I have at home. I could therefore see more of myself. I was pleasantly surprised. My body was looking better than I expected. My skin looked tighter, smoother than usual. Maybe my fair youth had not flown quite so far as I thought. It made me feel cheerful. It was a good way to start the day. Then I did something which completely changed my perspective. I put on my glasses. It dawned on me that maybe this would make the difference. It did. The deepening effects of the ravages of time were now clearly to be seen. I'm pleased to say that my cheerful mood was not dampened. I was amused by my foolishness and that amusement only brightened my spirits.

Looking in the mirror can be unsettling. Paul, one of the first Christians, talked about the uncomfortable experience of gazing at yourself, not gazing at your body but gazing at who you are. He saw those moments when we want to do the right thing, to be better, but find ourselves falling short. He said, "I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do".

Maybe those flocking to John the Baptist were feeling this kind of discontent. They wanted to be changed for the better and saw baptism as a symbol for the transformation for which they longed. In baptism they would go down into the water be washed clean and their old life would die. Then, they would rise up to a new life in which they were renewed by the grace of God.

For Jesus the symbolism is different. He is not changed. He is the one doing the changing. Transformation does not happen to him. He brings transformation. He does not receive blessing. He gives blessing. He goes into the water. That's a picture of him entering into the creation and becoming human. As he is submerged, he gives himself to the water. He is infused into all around. Life flows from him to humanity and the whole creation.

In the Orthodox Church they symbolise the change Jesus brings in a ritual they use when they remember his baptism. They call it The Blessing of the Waters. In this, they take a large bowl, fill it with water and ask God to pour out the Holy Spirit upon the water. Then, they take a cross and plunge the cross into the bowl. The picture is of the cross bringing blessing to the water. That reminds them that Jesus brings blessing to the creation.

They do this in a particularly dramatic way on the Greek island of Patmos. There they don't just have a large bowl of water. They have the sea. The service takes place on the quayside. Thirty or forty fishing boats draw up around the quay. The person leading the service does not just immerse a small cross in a bowl of water, they throw a very large cross into the sea. At that moment, all the fishing boats sound their horns and the children and young people jump from the boats and try to

be the first to get the cross and take it back to the quay. When we are finally able to meet again for worship, I plan to hold this service at the Thames. I'll throw the cross into the river and you can all jump in and try to be the first to get it.

In the Orthodox Church, the cross enters the water and brings blessing to the water. It's a picture of Jesus entering into creation and sharing what he is with the creation. It's a picture of him becoming human and sharing what he is with each person. Nothing therefore is godless, not the creation, not human beings, not you. All things are infused with the life of God. As we say in our prayers "Heaven and earth are full of your glory".

God bless you,

Tony