

### *Incognito*

*John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And all the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist and ate locusts and wild honey. And he preached, saying, "After me comes he who is mightier than I, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

*In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And when he came up out of the water, immediately he saw the heavens being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:4-11 ESV)*

There is a plethora of self help books in the bookstores. You will find more advice than you can follow on-line. Self improvement is big business. Dissatisfied with yourself? Then try these 5,7,10,12,101,365 steps. Feel incomplete or not yourself? Unlock your potential by searching within and doing / thinking / meditating / something in the area of positivity – you can get it (if you really want ... but you must try!).

These books seem to be a blend of old religious ideas that suggest that you get to heaven by being of good character and psychology that gives us insight about ourselves and where what we might previously have done for God is now done for ourselves. Of course this didn't produce successful lives and so came the idea that we are victims needing help to unlock our human potential or reach a higher plane and so more books flourished to release our potential or give us access to a higher reality. Today people seem to have moved on from acting independently of others on a journey to personal fulfilment to living in ways that help others and of course ourselves and the big search today is for meaning and purpose. So there are more books produced because the problem is always you – the individual – and you need to solve it or really 'solve you' – with the help of course of the expert in the self help book!

The universes found on the bookshelves for a better humanity reflect that deep belief that human beings are gods – seeking the light of enlightenment or our own creation – to perfect us in our own image. The Christian versions of this involve shaping God and his power to our wills and the creation of heaven on earth.

The Christian festival of The Epiphany is the message that God is not our guru for enlightenment, the ultimate author of the ultimate self-help guide – but is among us as King for both Jews and Gentiles – for everyone – and also he is God's Son – Immanuel – here mysteriously as one of us. Whether the focus of The Epiphany is Jesus' birth and for us today the arrival of the Wise Men or the baptism of Jesus, there is a point to instantly note – he is not what we expect. Jesus has stepped into time and lives each day – no 'beaming down' as an adult – The Epiphany belies the fact that 30 years were lived – not fast forwarded through – lived each day for God who is beyond time has entered time to rescue us.

And in preparation for his entry, God took people back out into the wilderness where they met a 'wilderness' character with wilderness clothes and diet who used water baptising people for forgiveness – a baptism of repentance – he was active when sins were confessed. He didn't direct people to wash themselves with a purification formula but baptised them. We don't know details – how he dealt with repeat offenders for example – we know from Luke's account that his understanding of repentance and forgiveness included amended behaviour – this stuff is never a game and never only talk – but John was the prelude – the preparation. And he points to the one to come whose baptism is in with and under God – he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit. Short on details again but the focus is on this baptiser – far greater than John – someone who has God at his command. Things are stirring in this wilderness – the prophets have been crying out for over a millennia – calling God's people back to him – and now what could be happening with this Elijah figure that the country of Judea and all of Jerusalem were going out to?

Mark then zeros in on one of the crowd. Like watching a film with subtitles or hearing a commentary – we see one Jesus from Nazareth of Galilee (and we might have even muttered 'Why? What good has come from Nazareth?') and there seems nothing out of the ordinary in relation to John. However John baptised this

happened again with Jesus but the camera, as it were, zooms in on Jesus and when Jesus came up out of the water he saw the heavens being torn open – we don't see what he saw by this – but the Spirit of God descends on him like a dove and he hears a voice from heaven 'You are my beloved Son. With you I am well pleased.' Mark gives us no indication that anyone there at the time noticed this personal Jesus' moment but he tells his readers / listeners to take note. Why?

Why tell anyone to take note? Because it's important and because there is a fear that we might miss it. There seems to be almost a secret here – God is incognito – you won't recognise him – he needs to be pointed out – and so we, the hidden crowd to that day, spot the personal experience of one man baptised by John. To the crowd – to the person in front of him in the queue or behind him – Jesus is just another one of them – a repenting sinner. And that is what Mark wants us to note that God among us looks like a sinner. Our versions of gods on earth are more powerful – not this hidden behind the opposite of what we see. Eyes see but ears see better.

We are here because we know the rest of the story. Mark writes his account because he knows it too. The journey to Earth begun in conception and most definitely hidden is now publicly declared to be enacted for God declares this Jesus of Nazareth whom the world would simply ignore to be his Son with whom he is pleased. This Jesus will always jolt us – shock us – with his closeness to sin – to sinners throughout his ministry – but at this point he himself looks like one. His enemies will claim him to be a sinner and worse, demonic. And at the end of his life only he will cry out to God for God will be silent as he is cursed hanging on the tree. But his death brings about the temple curtain being torn open from top to bottom and there is now access to God – relationship with God – through this sinner, scapegoat, Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

It is seeing Jesus – hearing Jesus – that brings the light on in the wilderness of human lives. It is being joined with this Jesus in his death and therefore with his resurrection – for we are here not as a history society but because this Jesus is risen from the dead we are alive with him – his Body as it were – living each day, not fast forwarding through them, but living each day in our identity – unique in our personality, gifts, talents, foibles, sins, relationships, shames – but bonded together as simul iustus et peccator – at the same time saint and sinner. We reject the categories of good and bad Christians that the world wants to use and insist on stating that we are sinners – our experience and that of those around us confirms this – and that we God's children, disciples of Jesus and we say this in and through faith as we struggle to live out our identities each day.

We turn to the Bible – to Christian counsel (living or dead – and by dead I mean reading books from the past) not as a self help guide or a 12 point programme but to hear, by the power of the Spirit, God and Jesus and thus to meet them and follow Jesus. We are not trying to become someone else. We are loved by God in Christ – unique as we are – but we find we want to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. To grow in trusting his promises. To grow in still seeing him where the world misses him – he's still incognito in bread and wine. And to return each day to the washing of regeneration where we were killed and raised to new life, born again, given the gifts of salvation, eternal life, saving faith, and the Holy Spirit and we can grow in the wonder of living in our baptism – struggling with our sins – and joyful in the truth that nothing can separate us from God's love in Christ Jesus. This growing happens in worship and also when we Monday to Saturday pause in the times that best fit our life schedules and be still and know that God is God – and by that I mean that wet man baptised in the river Jordan, the one who caused both the fall and rising of many in Israel and in the world today, that one on the cross – in the middle – God's Son who does the most inexplicable thing – and he's still doing it – he comes to serve us. As we read his Word, as we pray each day – particularly interceding for those around us, as we meditate on how God's Word shapes us and our day so we are shaped by God. When sins shame us, we are forgiven not to repeat them but to amend our behaviour in some way. When do them again, we can start again. When weary, we can be uplifted. When excited, we can stoop to humbly serve. And in all this Jesus remains hidden – incognito behind words, water, bread and wine – and we can even think at times we're delusional and this is all mind games – but then a word comes and stills the storm.

Our Christian lives are also incognito – mostly to us – though those around us at times might glimpse them for we live by faith and not by sight. This faith is not just talk – it is active in love – no matter our stumbling, stumbling ways for those baptised in Christ are also walking wet following Jesus, God's Son, while we live in a world full of so many gods that Jesus might easily be lost in the crowd ... until he is pointed out.