

Homily on Mark 1:1,9-11

January 8, 2018

Intro: Mark's gospel has no story of the miraculous conception of Jesus, nor of his birth in Bethlehem, nor of his exile in Egypt. Nor does it, like any of the New Testament, say anything about his more than twenty years as a common day laborer in Galilee. It begins with Mark's title for his work: "Beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God." Mark will use this title *Son of God* three more times in his gospel to signify the Christian belief that he is truly the Son of God. Today's passage is one of those times, it gives us the meaning of Jesus's identity and the purpose of his life; the passage has a Christological and a Soteriological meaning.

The Meaning for Jesus:

"Son of God" was a title used of the king of Israel, signifying that he had a special relationship to God and was to be God's agent of salvation for his people. Did Jesus know that he was to be the messiah? Did Mary tell him this? Or did he simply come to know that he knew the will of God in the Bible better than others? How did he sustain such a conviction through 20 years of obscure work? Whatever his expectation, this voice from heaven was that of his heavenly Father, telling him that he had a special relationship of sonship with God.

But Jesus never calls himself *the Son of God*. He calls himself *Son of Man*, a title used only on the lips of Jesus in the gospels. This raises a question for theologians: Does Jesus know he is uniquely the Son of God? How can this human being, this day laborer from Galilee with a fully human mind, know that he is the Son of God? A finite mind cannot grasp infinity.

Bernard Lonergan has given me the only satisfying clue to this mystery: Jesus has an awareness, a deep consciousness, that he is the Son of God, but this consciousness is subliminal, and cannot be expressed by language or known by concept. Since knowing means forming a concept of what one intimates, verifying that concept through many tests, and finally judging the adequacy of the concept, Jesus does not *know* he is the Son of God. If so, then this baptismal event is just a sharpening of that intimation that he is really the Son of God.

At any rate, the baptism reveals his mission for Jesus. The words, "in whom I am well pleased" echo the words of Yahweh to his servant in Isaiah 42: "Here is...my chosen one, *in whom I am well pleased, upon whom I have put my Spirit.*" This revelation links the Son of God with the work of the Servant of God, who is to bring forth salvation to the whole world. He will not do this by military conquest, nor even by shouting his proclamations in the street. His mission is a gentle one, in which he does not bruise the fragile. This gentle mercy is what will open the eyes of the blind, give freedom to prisoners, and so be a light to violent nations.

This mission is so contra-intuitive to our human way of winning, that Jesus will need the power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish it. In short, Jesus' way will be God's way on earth.

The Meaning for us is also Christological and Soteriological.

We know that *Son of God* refers not just to Jesus' role as messiah, but to his unique *identity* as Son of his Father. He is a member of the Trinity, which is symbolized by the descent on him of the third member of that Trinity, the Holy Spirit. This baptism is a Trinitarian event. But even if Jesus is Son of God, he evidently needs the power of the Holy Spirit, the work of the whole trinity, to accomplish his mission.

Our own baptism in the Holy Spirit has a Christological moment. We have been baptized into the Body of

Christ, and so we have a relationship to God as our loving Father that is qualitatively different from that of unbaptized human beings. Gordon Moreland used to ask his directees to hear these words addressed to themselves: "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. How often do we reflect on this new identity? When we count our blessings, do we count being a son of God in Christ as our chief blessing, one which dwarfs all other accidents of our lives? Do we believe that the Spirit given in baptism is what accomplishes God's will in our works? Obviously, this is the focus of the Ignatian Examen, and, as Ignatius teaches, we need to renew that focus daily. What a great way to begin our Examen!

Like Jesus, our mission comes from baptism. We have to contend with a violent world which thinks that getting ahead means shoving everyone else down. Jesus' message is the opposite of "Me first," or "America first," or even "My Catholic Church first." It is the opposite of thinking that peace comes from bombs, rather than from open-hearted, even self-sacrificing, generosity. We are now, in our world, Jesus' voice proclaiming a new and more effective way to peace. We, even more than Jesus, need the Spirit of God, which we did receive in our baptism, to learn this message, to put it into practice in our lives, and so to proclaim it by example to our world.

Today's feast is ordinarily the first Sunday of ordinary time. We need to make it a new beginning for us, as it was a new mission for Jesus, who turned from carpenter to prophet.

We need to make it our goal this year to finally hear and put into practice what Jesus will be proclaiming at every Eucharist and in our own readings from the Bible. Walk with Jesus throughout this year of grace and you will see why Pope Francis has instituted this year of mercy. You will know the good news and be the good news.