

MARK 1:4-11
THE COMMUNITY OF THE BAPTISED

Journey into Life was written a long time ago by Norman Warren – how many people read this little booklet and it changed their life? It explains the gospel very simply; this is how we are; this is what God has done; this is what we need to do; here is a prayer to pray that will lead you to Christ and to become a Christian. There was another booklet in the same series, though I can't remember what it was called, except that it had a blue cover, and was a companion booklet to this one. It was for new Christians and how to nurture your new-found faith. "Be part of a church!" was one of the principles; be part of a church with your fellow Christians. I remember it because the little cartoon picture that the booklet used was of a coal fire with one coal dropped out of the fire into the hearth and the coal had gone out; contact with the church was a key way of nurturing faith, but also of keeping that faith alive. It was and is good advice!

Church as community is important. We spoke earlier about what makes us church together and for now the most important word in that sentence is "together". What makes us a community of faith? You can't just throw people into a room together and say "hey presto! You are a community!" It doesn't work that way; it is not as simple as that! This is such a big issue in our culture: the headlines will tell us that in the not-too-distant future, almost half of Scottish households will be single person households, people living on their own; some will be elderly, some will be young. If community is a good thing, meeting other people and interacting with other people, where will these people living on their own find that community? How do churches express that sense of community once we've agreed that it's a good thing? What do we do to engender that sense of community, of people belonging together? Is there something of what we do on a Sunday morning? What more do we need to do? Are there places where people interact more with each other? It is not a simple one or other answer, but building community is such an important thing.

We spoke earlier about John the Baptist and his ministry, but I want to take a look at the people round about him, a crowd, or a community? These were the people who reacted and responded to John's ministry, the people who reacted and responded to what God was doing in the desert round Jerusalem through John and then later in the coming of Jesus. These are people united by a sense of God at work in all of them. That is what really binds them together. Ultimately, they are a community of baptised people, but there are some other things that held them together before they got to that point. There's also something to see about Jesus' place in that community, but that's for a little later.

What held this crowd together? There are 3 things: they listened together; they repented together; they were baptised together.

1. They listened together. Mark's version of events is very simple, some might say bald; we have the basic events and it is left to others to give us the detail. "*So John...*" (*Mark 1:4*) John was a preacher; he came to tell people a message that he knew God had put in his heart; it was a passion burning in him and he just had to deliver this message. It had two themes, repentance and forgiveness, and in moment see what that meant. But on the other side of that coin, to have a preacher you need people to listen to the message and so a crowd gathered to listen to the preacher; they listened together – "*the whole...*" (*Mark 1:5a*) If they were all there at once, that's a big crowd. There is a power to listening together as a shared experience; how many people claim they were in a crowd when someone famous delivers what becomes a famous address? Half the world later claims they were there! Listening together to a preacher opening up a passage of Bible is a hugely powerful shared experience, more than we realise; we listen together and listening together creates a common bond – this is something we heard together, we all heard it; it will affect all of us! They listened together, and this was the first stage in creating this common bond.

2. *They repented together – “Confessing...” (Mark 1:5b)* Luke’s version of the crowd’s reaction to John’s preaching will tell us that it wasn’t always straightforward; not everyone reacted well to John’s preaching. Some heard him preach, but they refused to respond and repent; they stayed stuck in the old ways. Some saw no need to repent – they were Jews after all! But there were lots who heard John, and his message struck a chord in their hearts, and they repented together. Repentance is all about turning to God, giving life a new direction; saying sorry for our sins and mistakes and learning to live life in a new way; *“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8)* says John. Now this is an intensely personal thing: my sins are my sins; your sins will be different; so there is an intensely personal part to this, but there is also a powerful shared experience here; many in the crowd reacted in the same way; they prayed the same prayer; they knelt down together to show themselves being humble before God. There is power in a shared experience like this: when people stand here at the front of the church to profess their faith for the first time, they take strength from the fact that other people are standing beside them doing the same thing, and it creates a shared bond. Less visible is the shared bond in the fact that everyone who is a member of the church has gone through the same kind of experience, perhaps in a different place, but has also stood here to profess faith and knows how it feels; we all know how it feels to declare our faith in public and make these promises to be disciples of Jesus; perhaps we should do more to bring that shared experience out into the open. They repented together.

3. *They were baptised together – “Confessing their...” (Mark 1:5b)* None of the gospels tells us what actually happened, except that John baptised these people in the Jordan river; we presume that the people went into the river and were immersed in its water and then came out again, but none of the gospels actually tells us that! They were baptised together; it was a shared response to the gospel, a shared declaration of sin and a shared profession of faith that God forgives; it was a shared declaration of commitment to be the kind of people God now wants them to be. Not all of us will remember being baptised; for some of us our parents declared their faith on our behalf and made promises to bring us up in Christian way. For others, you may well have been baptised as an adult and made this declaration and these promises for yourself. None of that really matters; but what does matter is that we are all together a community of baptised people. In one way or another, the church is generally a community of the baptised. In one way or another, we have all been through the water of baptism, symbolising God’s cleansing of our lives by the forgiveness of our sins; we are the community of the baptised, the community of forgiven people – God has done the same thing in all of us; we belong together because of these strong, deep, profound ties that bind us together.

Here’s a thing – Jesus is part of this community of baptised people. He was baptised by John. *“At that...” (Mark 1:9ff)* John wasn’t sure; he knew that Jesus was coming, someone greater, baptising with the Spirit not with water; but Jesus chose to be baptised. Several things happened when Jesus chose to be baptised: first of all, Jesus identified with those people who were repenting; He had no sin, but He stood alongside them and said “I’m with you! I’m on your side. I’m your Saviour and there will come a time when I will achieve your salvation!” Secondly, God declared Jesus as His Son, giving Him sense of acceptance, “this is who I am”, declaring Him, and declaring His love for Jesus. Thirdly, God equipped Jesus for ministry, the strengthening power of the Spirit coming on Him, equipping and commissioning Him for service. So, Jesus becomes part of the community of the baptised, One of us, One with us, a shared experience between Jesus and us. Jesus is part of our community!

We are a community of people who listen together to the Bible and who listen for what the Spirit is saying; a community of people who worship together, who sing the same songs; who pray together, and who use the same words in the Lord’s Prayer and say “Amen” to someone else’s words; a community of people who give together as a response to the grace of God; we are people who drink tea together, who share lunch together, who have just celebrated Christmas together in terms of our church life, who laugh together and mourn together. This

is what makes us church; this is who we are. We are people who are all loved by God, who are all forgiven our sins, who are all named by God and known by Him, people who call Jesus our Saviour and declare that Jesus is Lord. "Our community with one another consists solely in what Christ has done to both of us!" (Bonhoeffer)

The question to end with is this: how does this sense of being a community of baptised people change the way in which we look at one another? How do we look at the person who annoys us? Or the person who we think has let us down? Or who is not as strong a Christian as us? How do we look at the person who is on the edge of Church, who struggles to be part of our church family because the other demands on their life make it too difficult? What difference does it make to consider that Jesus is part of this community alongside us? God is at work amongst us; He is at work in all of us by the same Spirit and in the name of the same Lord Jesus; these profound shared experiences make us into a community of baptised people, a community of faith, a community in which the grace of God is at work. This is who we are; this is what we have to share with the world that cries out for community. God has done something profound for all of us, in all of us; this is what creates our community; is there something here for us to share with the world around us of people on their own?