

The Lord be with you:

and also with you.

Brothers and sisters in Christ,

as we gather we must recall the promises and warnings given to us in the Scriptures.

Let us therefore examine ourselves and repent of our sins.

Father God, we confess that we often take the gifts of your creation for granted,

and use them chiefly to further our own interests:

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Saviour Christ, we confess that we often give in to the selfish desires of our hearts,

and the uncaring ways of the world.

Christ, have mercy.

Christ, have mercy.

Holy Spirit, we confess that we often close our minds to your influence,

and fail to bear good fruits in our lives.

Lord, have mercy.

Lord, have mercy.

Absolution May God our Father forgive us our sins,
and bring us to the fellowship of his table with his saints for ever. **Amen.**

Genesis 1:1-5 [Six Days of Creation and the Sabbath]

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

This is the word of the Lord;

Thanks be to God.

Acts 19:1-7 [Paul in Ephesus]

While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul passed through the inland regions and came to Ephesus, where he found some disciples. He said to them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you became believers?' They replied, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' Then he said, 'Into what then were you baptized?' They answered, 'Into John's baptism.' Paul said, 'John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul had laid his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came upon them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied— altogether there were about twelve of them.

Mark 1:4-11 [The Baptism of Jesus]

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. 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 just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

This is the gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon

May the words of my lips and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you, Lord, our strength and our redeemer. **Amen.**

The Christmas season is over, not just in the world, but also in today's readings: they are all about beginnings. Beginnings of belief among different peoples, at different times. The first phrase in Mark's Gospel is "The beginning". Many years ago the Hebrew books of the Bible were given names, some of which are just the first word or phrase of that book in the Hebrew original.

Genesis is a good example: it translates easily from Hebrew to English: "In the beginning ..." or, better: "In the beginning of; or – when God began to create ...". So we read today an account of the beginning of everything: "In the beginning".

But if you turn a page of your Bible, there is another account of the Creation in the second chapter. Written by another source. The first is identified as the "J" or Judges source – from the time of the judges in early Israel. The second is "P" – a priestly source. The J source concentrates on the beginning of the world. It portrays a dark, watery chaos similar to the primordial state in Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Greek traditions.

We are told: "God said, let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it separate the waters from the waters". Historians trace that concept – of the world covered by a great dome – to Babylonian myths about how they envisaged the beginning of the world. The Israelites utilised that in their concept of how the world began, while they lived in exile in Babylon. The concept is one of there being a blank canvas on the earth which God, as it were, brought to life – day; night; sky; dry land, etc.. It is extremely elegant and poetic.

The Priestly source moves quickly into the beginning of man – Adam and the Garden of Eden. "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." "Adam" means "earth" or "ground". Man comes from the dirt; from nothing.

A note in my Study Bible is worth remembering: "Genesis is not a scientific or historical textbook in the modern sense". I think that fights between creationists and darwinian adherents are a nihilistic waste of time. We all live in faith, no matter which theory of our origins is fought over. Rather, I see the story of Creation in Genesis as a narration of ancient Israel's traditions and concepts of the past – a mixture of myths and legends, cultural memories, revisions of tradition, and literary brilliance. And brilliant they certainly are.

Let's also take a look at what our second reading has to tell us. The tale of the power of the Holy Spirit of which we read in the Acts is hugely informative.

It shows that the Holy Spirit comes from the confident faith of our fellow human beings, just as St. Paul demonstrated: "Paul laid his hands on them, and the Spirit came upon them." We believe in this physical presence of the Holy Spirit: we call upon Him at all the sacraments, especially baptism, confirmation, ordination, etc.

But let us not forget that today celebrates the baptism of the Lord. It is a spare story in Mark. All we're told is that Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan river. Yet this simple if under-whelming baptismal tale is suddenly transformed into a direct connection between humanity and God. We are told that "Jesus saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." There are only four occasions in the entire gospels where this direct connection from heaven happens: I call them glimpses of Jesus's glory, where God the Father broke through into our world.

First, today's passage at Jesus' baptism: "You are my Son, the beloved".

Second, at the Transfiguration: a voice from the cloud, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him."

Thirdly: at Gethsemane and crucifixion: the public declaration of Jesus as the Messiah: Jesus cried out: "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit".

Fourthly: at the Ascension of Jesus into heaven: "He was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God".

These rare few instances of the voice and power of God are so strong and confident that I always come away from those passages with renewed awe. We are graced with the benevolence of this God to help and assist us. That is why I use that word "awe". Today's gospel reading gives us a glimpse of our God; our Father. I find it impossible to disbelieve.

In these short extracts from scripture we have precious jewels – clear messages to convince us that our belief system of Christianity isn't a hiding place for credulous fools. No: it convinces us again and again that in our

scriptures there are pearls beyond price. Nuggets of pure gold. And all just waiting for us to stumble over them. Like today.

And now to God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, majesty, dominion, power and glory. Amen.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.

I believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended to the dead.

On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Holy Catholic Church,
the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.

Amen.

Intercessions, beginning with the Collect of the 1st Sunday after Epiphany

Eternal Father,
who at the baptism of Jesus revealed him to be your Son,
anointing him with the Holy Spirit:

Grant to us, who are born of water and the Spirit
that we may be faithful to our calling as your adopted children;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Keep the church true in obedience to the example and command of her Lord to baptize for the forgiveness of sins and into the life of faith. Give grace to all Christian people to live according to the promises made at their baptism. Lord, in your mercy *... hear our prayer*

We pray that the whole world may know the healing power of God. Let the voice of his messengers be heard and his name be praised among all nations. *... hear our prayer*

We pray for those who at this time are preparing for baptism, remembering especially those known to us and those who live in this community. We pray that godparents will remember their responsibility for the spiritual life of those they have sponsored. *... hear our prayer*

Have mercy on all who suffer in body, mind or spirit. Our prayer is especially for all who have been affected by COVID-19, whether personally or through their families and friends; those for whom the virus has left them distressed; those for whom the brightness of life has been dimmed by fear. May the light of hope shine through their darkness and give them comfort. *... hear our prayer*

We pray for the departed who began their earthly lives by following Christ in baptism and have passed with him through death to life. May their joy be for ever in the worship of the Holy Trinity. *... hear our prayer*

Amen.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us.

And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory,
for ever and ever, Amen.

Blessing:

May Christ draw you to humility and worship,
and bring you to see God at work;

and the blessing of God Almighty,
the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be with you and remain with you always.

Amen.

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