

The Baptism of Christ – 13 January 2008

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Readings	Psalm 29	Is 42 1-9
	Acts 10 34-43	Matt 3 13-17

Baptism of Christ – important event – marks beginning of his messianic ministry, John publicly announces arrival of Messiah and start of his ministry. Baptism part of unfolding epiphany, revelation, showing forth of who Jesus is. Baptism signifies he is consecrated to God, accredited by or approved of by God. He also meets all God's righteous requirements for the Messiah. In his baptism Jesus fully identifies himself with us, our sin and failure. He needed no repentance or cleansing from sin but he became our substitute. Dove descends from heaven symbolic of HS and a voice from heaven is heard – 'This is my Son whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'

Reminded me of voice of God heard on another occasion – transfiguration – when voice from heaven also says 'Listen to him' [Matt 17].

Voice of God also theme in Psalm 29 read today. Want to focus on it – struck me powerfully.

Described as a psalm of creation, hymn in praise of king of creation whose majesty and power are trumpeted by thunderbolts of rainstorm. Begins with summons to all beings in creation to worship almighty God.

Glory of Lord not only visible in creation but also audible in creation's awesome voice. Voice of Lord is majestic, powerful and mighty as it thunders over creation, both destroying and creating or giving life – shakes deserts, make hills of Lebanon and Mt Hermon shake and quake; breaks cedars of Lebanon, mightiest of trees, twists oaks and strips forests bare. Alternative translation of v 9 says 'voice of Lord makes deer give birth'- suggesting the divine voice's creative power.

Psalm features numbers 4, 7 and 10, symbols of completeness in OT. Name Yahweh or the Lord features 4 times in intro and conclusion, 10 times in body. 'Voice of Lord' appears 7 times. Psalm to Yahweh also thought to be testimony and protest against worship Canaanite god Baal who was said to be present thunderstorms.

In short, sound and fury of creation's awe-inspiring power proclaims glory of Israel's God.

Psalm is testimony to fact that we worship an awesome, ineffable God who is beyond describing and knowing; whose power is overwhelming, whose voice brought whole universe into being.

Want to ask question: 'Given nature of God, God's breathtaking power and self-revealing character, how is it then, that many people lament that they either do not experience God or they no longer experience God. They have no sense of presence of God in their lives?' How can this be?

Catholic theologian Ronald Rollhauser puts it like this: 'How did we move from a condition wherein a sense of God's existence dominated an entire culture and consciousness to a situation within which our normal consciousness is agnostic and we seem to lack the very mental software necessary to think, imagine and feel God?' [pg 11] He goes on to say 'Simply put, the problem... is not so much that the existence of God is denied by certain persons, but that God is absent from the ordinary consciousness and lives of believers, God is not enough alive or important in ordinary consciousness.' [pg 20]

Rollhauser explores why apparent absence of God is common experience. Basic thesis is that is what mystic and poet John of Cross called 'a fault in contemplation'. We have lost or failed to develop capacity for contemplation. Defines contemplation as being fully aware, experiencing an event fully in all its aspects. We know also as a form of prayer. Roll. says 'In Western culture today most of us have an atrophied contemplative faculty, a muddled self-awareness. **God is present to us but we are not present to God.** We lack contemplativeness and because of this we lack a vital experience of God. The eclipse of God in ordinary awareness is, in the end, a fault of contemplation.' [Pg 22]

He explains that we are natural contemplatives, we crave solitude and quiet. We are designed to commune with God, we are built for relationship with God, for worship and prayer.

But, Roll. says the age we live in makes it hard for us to develop our interior life, to live an examined life. Theologian Jan Walgrave comments that 'our age constitutes a virtual conspiracy against the interior life'.

Rollhauser describes qualities of our culture and society that contribute to that common cry 'I want to but I do not experience God'. Things that are familiar to us, that we worry about, we talk about and preach about. I want to mention just three of the things he identifies.

Narcissism – excessive self-preoccupation. We are preoccupied with ourselves to an unhealthy degree. We are also extreme in our individualism. When we stand before reality preoccupied with ourselves we can see little of what is actually there to be seen, little beyond our own heartaches and problems. Narcissism is the antithesis of contemplation. We have trouble seeing and experience God because we have trouble perceiving any reality beyond ourselves and our own reality. [pg 36]

Then there is what R. calls **pragmatism**. Term comes from Greek word *pragma* meaning 'business', holds connotations of efficiency, sensibleness and practicality. Our culture is obsessed with being busy and doing; with striving and achieving; with being practical, useful and efficient. We take our sense of worth and from what we do and have, measure others' worth same way. We are little concerned with who we are, with being, rather than doing. This causes the excessive busyness we see in many people, even mature, retired people. Pragmatism works against contemplation because spending time in prayer and contemplation is regarded as a waste of time. In terms of the pragmatic model, they do not accomplish anything, there is not output to measure. Contemplation dies not because we are bad, but because we are too busy.

Roll. says we are also a society that suffers from rampant **restlessness**. What is it? Opposite of restfulness, which Roll defines as a form of awareness, a way of being in life with a sense of ease, gratitude, peace and prayer. We are restful when ordinary life is enough. And **it is not**, or seldom is. We are always striving for more, better and different, hence we are restless, we feel unfulfilled and dissatisfied. Roll says 'Today nothing seems enough for us. The simple and primal joys of living are mostly lost as we grow ever more restless, driven, compulsive and hyper. In our lives there is less ease, and more fever; less peacefulness, and more obsessive activity; less enjoyment, and more excess. These are the signs of unbridled restlessness.' [pg 43] Because we are restless, we examine our lives less and less.

In short, Roll says, Narcissism, pragmatic busyness and restlessness are common and 'normal' in our culture; contemplativeness, solitude and prayer are not. [pg 49]

Can you identify qualities of your own life in what I described, have you lamented that you do not experience God or no longer experience God?

What do we do about it?

Good place to start is by making time to be quiet. Writer Karen Armstrong notes that all religious traditions stress importance of silence. All monastic traditions of both Christian and Buddhist faiths build discipline of silence into each day. I mentioned in a sermon some time ago that in Orthodox tradition there is a saying that God's mother tongue is silence.

No matter how uncomfortable or unwelcome, is an unavoidable truth, that if we want to experience God, develop or recover our capacity for contemplation, for being fully present to God, ourselves and all of life; if we want to listen to Jesus as instructed; if we want to hear God, whether that mighty voice described in Psalm 29 or still small voice that Moses heard, we need to make time and space for silence and solitude.

Still early in new year, some people may still be thinking about making resolutions, perhaps broken them looking for new ones to make. Encourage us to make it a resolution to make time for silence. That way we can make a start on recovering or developing our capacity for contemplation. In Xmas sermon I talked about lengths God goes to be present to us, to draw us into encounter and ultimately relationship. Christ's total immersion in our human nature symbolized by his Baptism yet another example, another revelation of God's amazing love for us. Asking us to respond by setting aside time and space for silence so that we can experience that love in deeper and even more ways is surely not asking too much, is it?