

SERMON: 2018/01/07 (1st Sunday aft. Epiphany, Year B) - Gen. 1:1-5 & Mk. 1:4-11_BTR

[Invite the children to sit at the front.]

Five *hundred* years before Jesus was born (in Bethlehem), there was a man in Greece called *Leucippus*.

And Leucippus was a very, *very* clever man.

Back then, long before *even* your grandparents were born, there was no electricity; they hadn't even invented glass yet(!), and there was no such thing as microscopes.

But the ancient Greeks were an unusual people, and really curious about the world and how it works and what it is made of.

And Leucippus - *thousands* of years before their discovery by (modern-day) scientists - *guessed* that all things were probably made of "parts" sooo small that they're invisible to our eyes: atoms.

How could he know this?!

Well, [take an apple out, a chopping-board, and a knife] consider this.

It clearly exists.

It isn't just an illusion.

It has "size."

And "weight."

And I can easily cut it into segments like so, [begin chopping] .

And then I can cut those into smaller slices.

And then I can cut those into even smaller chunks.

And I can cut those into tinier bits.

And on and on.

Eventually, the knife becomes useless.

But, if we had the right tools, we could keep cutting the apple until its (constituent) parts become so small that they seem no longer to be real.

And how can that be?

How can everything be made of nothing?

But this is exactly what we hear the Bible saying this morning: that there is someone - God! - with *awesome* power who has made this beautiful world, and He did it by creating every little bit of it (and all by Himself).

Let's pray: Father God, we are struck with wonder by Your fascinating creation. Thank you for making birds that fly, and the massive whales in the oceans, and stars and creepy spiders and everything else too. Amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

Why was Jesus baptized? Have you ever asked yourself that?

John indicates *pretty* clearly that it is necessary '*for the forgiveness of*

sins' (Mk. 1:4), but... *Jesus was sinless*, [2 Cor. 5:21]!

And, perceiving this, The Baptist says - essentially - 'Whoa. ... [time out]'; "you should be doing this not the other way round!" And he 'makes [it] crystal clear that Jesus does not need [to undergo the ritual].' [n.1]

Why does He, then?

Well, to answer this question you need to ask yourself another:

Is it odd that we hear next to *nothing* about Jesus' childhood?

(The exception, of course, is the briefly mentioned "business" of Him wandering away from His parents, Mary and Joseph, to debate with the teachers of the Law in the Temple. [See: Lk. 2:41-52])

Apart from this *sole* exception, we know *nothing* about *most* of His life, actually. Yes, there are apocryphal legends, but the early Church declined to include such stories among *the Canon* - that is, they excluded them from that collection of sacred Scriptures we call "the Bible."

And they did that because those stories failed to win any legitimacy among that first generation of Christians who actually *knew* our Saviour (best), including His own mother and siblings.

And why was that the case?

Because they were "tall tales" - charming ones, but incongruous with what must have been, in fact, the reality: that He had been a very *ordinary* boy.

Remarkable in learning, maybe [see: Lk. 2:47] - in His knowledge of His people's tradition; *but* otherwise of no *miraculous* capability.

Does that surprise you?

That the Lord - through whom *all* things were created [Col. 1:16] - was, initially, in His incarnate form, normal.

Unexceptionable.

Because it shouldn't:

Those *supernatural* demonstrations of Heavenly power that capture our imagination (in the gospels) - walking on water [Mt. 14:25], calming the storm [Mt. 8:26; Mk. 4:29; Lk. 8:24b], multiplying food [Jn. 6:5-13], raising the dead [Jn. 11:44], etcetera - these are not things that (biological) creatures like us can do.

X-men, yes.

Aliens from Krypton, sure.

But not real people.

And that's what Jesus was.

Genuinely.

A man.

And men can't do such wonderful things.

God can; which is why, says Saint Paul, to the Philippians, He '*emptied Himself*' when He took our '*human form*', [2:7].

And having done that, Jesus, as He explains, "'can do nothing on my own [without help from the Father].'" [See: Jn. 5:19,30.]

So, we're present with what seems like a conundrum:

If the details about Jesus' earliest years were almost entirely *un-*noteworthy, but *later* He did impress audiences - to the point of not just wonder but *fearfulness* - by displays of unnatural ability [see, for example: Lk.8:37]; this "data" suggests that there must have been a "watershed" moment: a juncture of *transformation*, and this is His baptism by John in the Jordan, when witnesses saw something that looked like 'a dove' "descend" on Him from the sky.

And though we may imagine this happening as a subtle, intangible occurrence; Mark describes it in *violent* terms; that 'the heavens [were] *torn* apart', and Jesus was *powerfully* altered by the experience, [Mk. 1:10].

So much so that He went from being a quiet, provincial woodworker - a smalltown nobody - to a healer of such uncanny and unprecedented success that sources hostile to the Christian movement - contemporaries of Jesus' who rejected His messianic claims - begrudgingly concede this as a *fact* about him. Celsus, for example, a skeptical non-Jewish philosopher, says Jesus was "magic." [n.2]

Which is more than a little reassuring to get that kind of corroboration for our beliefs.

But we shouldn't just be reassured; we should get excited too: because the same Holy Spirit that *radically* changed our Savior (into one worthy of our highest praise [Phil. 2:9]), is made available to us, today:

Saint Peter says, in Acts 2, verse 38, that, and I quote, "'Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And *you* will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Th[is] promise is for you and your children and for all...'"

And yet, some of you are sitting here thinking to yourself: "But I *have* been baptised. So, why do I feel no different? Why am I like everyone else?"

Because the Spirit can 'depart from [us]' [1 Sam. 16:14].

In the (first) *Book of Samuel*, the prophet is sent to anoint Saul as king of Israel. And we know how that turned out!

After all, we just celebrated the birth of a Messiah 'born of *David's* line', right? If you came to the delightful "Nativity Service," you sang that line in the carol, 'While Shepherd's Watched.'

So, unless we believe that God made a mistake in choosing Saul, we need to take seriously that, for at least a moment, he was, in fact, the "real deal," and fully equipped *and commissioned* to carry out that crucial role.

And to be sure, at the beginning of chapter 10, we hear of him being 'anointed'

and, by that, 'g[iven a new]...heart', [v. 1,9].

Then, a few disastrous pages later, the Holy Spirit withdraws from Saul; He retreats.

And this is a sobering thought.

Now, I'm personally inclined to believe that what we're faced with here is more of a figure of speech than a literal description of the situation, for, in *John* 10, verses 28 and 29, we're told that we can rely on God to *never* let us go. And so the author of *Samuel* means only - perhaps - that it *appeared* as if the Holy Spirit had left the king, when, actually, all that had happened was that *Saul* gave himself over completely to self-love, and so sidelined the Spirit's influence - to the extent that He *seemed* completely absent, and, for all *practical* purposes, *was* as such.

And this can happen to you and to me too.

If we're not actively, *repeatedly* seeking, all the time, to implement God's vision for our lives and this church, we can't expect to see real, obvious change.

Therefore, *ask* for the Holy Spirit to "descend" on you like He did at the Jordan. And then keep on asking!

Every day.

Make this your new year's resolution.

Footnotes:

1. Piper, John (15th of January, 2016), 'Why Was Jesus Baptized?', *Desiring God*, available at <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/why-was-jesus-baptized> (accessed January 4, 2017).
2. See: Huffman, Douglas S. (December 1997), 'The Historical Jesus of Ancient Unbelief', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 40, No. 4, pp. 551-564.

Further Reading:

1. Edwards, James R. (March 1991), 'The Baptism of Jesus According to the Gospel of Mark', *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 34, No. 1, pp. 43-57.