

**Reflection on the Gospel-Feast of the Baptism of Jesus Year B
(Mark 1:7-11)**

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The Baptism of Jesus marks the end of the Christmas season and the beginning of Ordinary Time. Many of us have been fortunate enough to get some time after Christmas to reflect on the past year and to set goals for the year ahead so that we might move into Ordinary Time with renewed life and vigour for the sake of our planet.

Mark's story of the baptism forms part of the prologue to the gospel. It provides the reader with insights that the characters in the story are invited to learn along the way. It is succinct and at the same time replete with evocative imagery. At one level, the imagery leads us back into Israel's faith traditions and forward into the unfolding mystery of God's new way of being in the world through the ministry, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. On another level, the imagery embraces the entire universe, the heavens and the earth, celestial and earthly beings, the human and the more-than-human.

The preceding verses (Mark 1:5-6) have told us that John the Baptist has drawn huge crowds of people from the Judean countryside and from Jerusalem to be baptised in the Jordan River. In the midst of this activity, John now suddenly announces that one more powerful (literally "the stronger one") is about to come on the scene. John knows who he is in relation to this coming one: he is not even worthy to bend down and untie the thong of his sandals. This footwear imagery evokes both the humility and earthiness of John and the relentless journeying of Jesus in Mark's gospel. While John baptised with water, the more powerful one will baptise with the Holy Spirit.

The baptism story is a commissioning story. The heavens are torn apart, evoking the prophetic hope of Isaiah 64:1 and foreshadowing the tearing of the curtain of the temple at Jesus' death (Mark 15:38). In other words, all the barriers between God and God's creation are now dismantled. Just as God's spirit hovered over the waters of creation, so now the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus in the form of a dove, giving birth to something entirely new. The God of the universe addresses Jesus as "my beloved Son". There are echoes here of the story of Isaac, the beloved son of Sarah and Abraham, the one through whom God's promises were to be fulfilled. Isaac is the ancestor of Israel who struggled with God. God's people have always struggled with God and will continue to do so. But God's favour continues to rest on God's people just as it rests on Jesus of Nazareth, God's beloved. We take heart from this in face of a world that cries out for justice and compassion.