

“One in the Queue”, a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand, on the first Sunday of Epiphany, 10 January 2016, and based on the gospel for the day Luke 3:15-17, 21-22.

There are few things more equalising than queues or lines or lists.

One day in Sydney I was walking into a seminar in a respected foreign policy institute. Two interns at the door were checking names to ensure only people on the list gained entry. I got to the door at the same time as Bob Hawke, the former Prime Minister of Australia. Now, Mr Hawke is among Australia’s most well-known figures. I stepped back to let him through. And as he went through the door into the building, one of the interns moved forward carrying a clip board with the list of people invited to the event, with the intention of asking him his name, clearly not having recognised him. Mr Hawke did not notice, but the other intern saw the disaster about to unfold: a distinguished foreign policy institute not recognising one of Australia’s distinguished foreign policy leaders. So the other intern, with alacrity, stepped forward and said, in quite a loud voice for the other intern and several of us to hear – “It is so good to see you Mr Hawke. Welcome.”

Fred Craddock says Luke seems to make Jesus just one more figure in a line, a queue, as if John says “Next!” And the next in line happens to be Jesus.

Luke treats the baptism of Jesus as if he was one in a line of people being baptised that day.

“Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised...”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer makes a related point in his book on Ethics ... (pp 84-85):

“God becomes human out of love for humanity. God does not seek the most perfect human being with whom to be united, but takes on human nature as it is. Jesus Christ is not the transfiguration of noble humanity but the Yes of God to real human beings ... the merciful Yes of a compassionate sufferer.”

Bonhoeffer is saying that Jesus was not selected by God because he was some exemplary human being, as if there was some quality that made Jesus especially noticeable. As if he was a better human being, a more courageous or noble or loving human being than we are.

Bonhoeffer is saying that God embraced the full humanity of Jesus, and there was nothing about him that made him more worthy of being selected than you or me.

This in the face of the Nazis holding up the ideal person.

Queues treat us the same. That becomes evident when people try to claim priority or push in.

Craddock goes on to tell the story of being invited to preach at Riverside Church in New York. Now in days gone by there were pulpits of distinction. For Presbyterians they included Madison Avenue and Fifth Avenue in New York, and one of them was Riverside Church not far from the United Nations. The minister of the time was William Sloane Coffin. He was going to be away for the weekend and Craddock had agreed to fill in. Coffin had arranged for Craddock to stay in his apartment. So he obtained the key and settled into Coffin's apartment. There were notes in the house so Craddock could find his way around. On Sunday morning he went looking for breakfast and so headed for the fridge, only to find a note on the door that said there was no food inside and Craddock should go to the church where there was breakfast. Well, thought Craddock, that is wonderful, I'll eat with the staff and find out where I am to stand and sit and do this and that when I get to the church.

He grabbed his robe and walked to the church. When he got there, there was a long line, about 250 men from the street. Craddock joined the line. The person called out "Next!" and Craddock went to the window and was given a scoop of egg, a sausage pattie, a biscuit and a cup of coffee. He found a place at a table and got into conversation with a man. And he learned the man was a stockbroker who had been doing well "but the bottle got me; I lost my house, my job, my family, my marriage, everything and here I am."

"What do you do?" the man asked. Craddock said he was a preacher at which the man laughed and said "It gets all of us, doesn't it." Craddock writes ... I wanted to stand up, tap my glass to get people's attention and say ... "Listen you losers. In a few minutes I'll be in one of the great pulpits in America and you'll be back on the street. I'm not like you." But he didn't, because it was not true.

Jesus was in the line of people waiting to be baptised.

I've been reading Rowan Williams excellent and recent little book on "Being Christian". I hope we use it for studies in Lent.

The first chapter is about baptism. Williams says that Eastern icons of the baptism of Jesus show Jesus up to his neck in the water, while below, sitting under the waves, are the river gods of the old world, representing the chaos that is to be overcome.

Baptism, says Williams, is about restoring our full humanity, not destroying it. In order to restore our humanity, Jesus enters fully into our life, comes down fully to our level, to where things are shapeless and meaningless, among the old river gods.

Our humanity in Jesus is not therefore about being successful and in control. Our humanity reaches out its hand from the depths of chaos to be touched by the hand of God, to hear the voice of God from the depths of chaos.

Which is why Christian people are to be found where humanity is most at risk, where humanity is most disfigured and disordered and needy, among the old river gods.

Being baptised is being led towards the chaos and the neediness of humanity, in ourselves but also as seen in others.

That's why Jesus is in the queue. He is entering into the mess of humanity.

This is our queue, our line, our calling, to enter into the messiness and chaos of human being.

And there, in our vulnerability, to reach out, with much below the surface, we receive the Spirit of God, and we hear God's voice to us.

If we see ourselves above the queue, better than that, and if we try to claim priority, we miss the Spirit and the voice. Even if we find ourselves in the centre podium gaining the gold medal or obtaining an outstanding qualification or being at the peak of our ability, when it comes to the kingdom of God, we're only another person in a queue, a line, where Jesus is.

"Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Above the front entrance to this Church is the carving of a dove.

I know some do not leave by the front door, but those who do, I invite you, as you leave, to look up to that dove, and to be reminded as you go into the world, that your true being is as part of the queue, reaching out from the old river gods just below the surface, and in that reaching out, day by day by day, hearing God say: "You are my child, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Know that those words have nothing to do with your goodness or expertise or reputation or accomplishment or qualifications or lack of them.

It has to do with the fact that Jesus is in the queue with you, waiting with you for the reign of God to come, and the invitation into that kingdom is as simple as the word "Next!".

And if you come back next Sunday, as you enter through the door, pause on the threshold, look up to that dove, and know you are here as one in a queue, with Jesus, having no priority no extra standing, but also having no less priority and no less standing than anyone else. You are joining a queue of people, waiting for the voice, waiting for the Spirit.