

St Mark 1:10-11                      *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."*

When the first lockdown began I foolishly let it be known that I intended to read Hilary Mantel's 900 page blockbuster "The Mirror and the Light". A few months later I had to admit that it was still sitting untouched on the bookshelf and now as this latest lockdown kicks in I will say only that I might get round to it this time. That's not to say I haven't been reading books at all and in fact recently I've turned to Rumer Godden's *Black Narcissus* after watching the made for television remake of the old 1947 film, broadcast in three episodes over the festive season. The original story was written in 1939, and centres around the efforts of a group of nuns to establish a convent with a school and a hospital in an old palace overlooking the Himalayas. In the recent TV series the views of the mountains are fantastically clear, but in the original book the goings on in the convent are rather more shady, not least when the tentative equilibrium is disturbed by the sudden arrival of the General's exotic young nephew ostensibly to learn English but ultimately to unsettle the community one way or another. He is the source of the title, *Black Narcissus*, which is the name of the scent he wears and the worldly distraction he represents. There's much more to it than that of course, which you will know if you saw it on television, or indeed remember Deborah Kerr as the troubled Sister Clodagh in the original film.

But for the moment it's the sudden arrival of that young man and the unsettling effect he has on those around him that brings me back to the traditional theme of this Sunday after the Epiphany, the Baptism of Jesus at the hands of his cousin John the Baptist in the river 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."* There's nothing the General can say of his nephew in *Black Narcissus* that comes close to the drama, the cinematography even, of this decisive moment in the opening verses of St Mark's Gospel. *You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.* But it's a similarly sudden sort of arrival that Jesus makes, despite the predictions of John the Baptist and indeed those of the prophet Isaiah many centuries before. Isaiah had talked of the one who would prepare the way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, and now it is in the wilderness that John appears and insists "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me..." But still Jesus appears as it were out of the blue and without fuss or ceremony. In those days, St Mark tells us, in those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. But then comes the drama. *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 was the beginning of the unsettling effect that Jesus would have on those around him. For even as we go back into lockdown, this was the unlocking of the ministry of Jesus and his baptism was the key to sending him out, first into the wilderness himself for his forty days and forty nights of trial and temptation, and then back to Galilee for the beginning of his ministry, the calling of the disciples, and the work of preaching and teaching and healing that for the next three years or so would continue to unsettle those around him and disturb their equilibrium and challenge all their comfortable assumptions and expectations. Technically it wasn't the baptism by John that provided the key so much as the anointing by the Holy Spirit descending like a dove on him, as St Mark put it. Just as in the Book of Acts the baptism of John wasn't enough for those early believers until Paul had come to Ephesus and laid his hands on them and the Holy Spirit came upon them. Just as in the beginning of the Book of Genesis, nothing happened until a wind from God swept over the face of the waters, that wind, that ruach, that breath, that Spirit that disturbed and unsettled the waters and began the very process of creation. A process that continued the day Jesus was baptised, and began the disturbing and the unsettling all over again. *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."*

Amen.