

My thoughts on today's readings lead me to think about our Uniting Church emblem, which is familiar to us all; but like favourite Bible passages, sometimes we grow used to familiar things. Here I am trying to link what the church says about the emblem to the scriptures we have heard today.



If you look at the logo, you can see a black circle background which represents the darkened world. This reminds us of the first verses of Genesis. From the Living Bible – “When God began creating the heavens and the earth, the earth was at first a shapeless, chaotic mass with the Spirit of God brooding over the dark vapours.”

This is the same Spirit of God (who Mark wrote) came down and alighted on Jesus as he came out of the waters of the Jordan River and proclaimed him as the son of God who brings delight to the Lord. Indeed, this is also the same Spirit who broods over each of us and cherishes us and wills us to bring delight to the Lord.

Upon this background of darkness is the cross of Christ, the risen crucified one.

But our gospel story today tells of Jesus baptism. This event marked the beginning of Jesus public ministry. He heard the voice of God and he must have realised that he would have to leave his previous life in the carpenter's shop in Nazareth and now begin a life of service and teaching, healing and mission.

I enjoyed reading some of today's readings from the Living Bible. It translates the first sentence of Mark as:-

“Here begins the wonderful story of the Jesus the Messiah, the Son of God.”

And it is a most wonderful story because Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness.

But Jesus is also the one who was killed because he challenged the accepted the corrupt and hateful order of things in Palestine, 2000 years ago. Many of his followers ever since have also been martyred or have suffered in other ways. We know that the cross of Christ calls us to live by a different set of values. That was the experience of the believers in Ephesus as recorded in Acts 19. Later in that chapter we are told that the believers met opposition because Paul had persuaded so many people that handmade silver gods were not gods at all. And so, their sales had fallen and they stirred up trouble for the Christians. Even today when profits are challenged, Christian people can be out of step with popular views.

The dove with wings of flame depicts the Holy Spirit. We have just mentioned that the Spirit alighted on Jesus and then before Jesus ascended he told his followers that he would send the Holy Spirit to them in order to continue guiding and leading them.

And so, we have the accounts in Acts of the Spirit falling upon the disciples like tongues of fire at Pentecost or in other instances like the one recorded in Acts 19 of the apostles laying their hands on believers who then received the Holy Spirit.

And so, we in the Uniting Church affirm that we too at our baptism and confirmation or conversion are given the Spirit so that we might now in 2021, continue Jesus work in this part of creation. We are given the Spirit so that accepted and welcomed by Jesus, we might welcome and embrace those others we meet in our daily lives. Here in Eden we pray and strive to be a welcoming inclusive church. We pray for the Spirit's leading to show us how we can best support each other and our communities, in this challenging time

of pandemic, which has followed on from our fire crisis of a year ago. As many wise leaders, have said – we need to think globally but act locally. Perhaps we could think of the many ways we do that already and also of how we might expand our actions along those lines.?

Finally, the incomplete U at the bottom of the logo reminds us that we are all on a journey. We are “uniting” rather than “united” and we are on a journey, looking to the future and especially looking for reconciliation and renewal of the whole of creation.

So, we start a New Year not only with readings which deal with newness “ First things first” - but which also celebrate our triune God, at work in creation, at work in redemption and at work in our hearts now in 2021.

A song that I think is inspiring is “All praise to Him” by Sovereign Grace music.

https://youtu.be/6_DVTURtey0