

Sermon for the Baptism of Christ 13 January 2019
By The Reverend Colin James at All Saints Church Wokingham
The readings were Isaiah 43.1-7 and Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

Here at All Saints we're spoilt for choice! We have not one but two stained glass windows showing the baptism of Christ. One is appropriately just beside the font. And you can see the other by simply turning around and looking all the way down to the Lady Chapel. But both share the same error, common to practically all depictions of this important event. Jesus is standing while John pours water over him using a scallop shell. Quite recently one of our congregation drew our attention to the fact that the Lady Chapel window also shows another mysterious hand hovering over John's. This can only be the hand of God, reaching down as it does in a shaft of light in which the dove, who represents the Holy Spirit, is descending.

But the error I mentioned is that it's surely almost certain that in fact Jesus and all those who came to be baptised by John in the River Jordan went right under the water. The symbolism is more than just being washed. It's also being drowned and coming up out of the water with a new life. The official liturgy of the church says, "We thank you, Father, for the water of baptism. In it we are buried with Christ in his death. By it we share in his resurrection. Through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit" (Christian Initiation p 87) This of course refers to our own baptism when we're made members of Christ's body, the church. And it aims to link us with the great events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

And yet clearly Jesus' own baptism, which we commemorate today, is something very different. Unlike us, and all the others who heard John's call to repent, he had no need to repent. So why did he come and join the sinners? As we shall see, the answer lies in the question. But before we think this through, let's remind ourselves of what the four gospels tell us. This is one of the fairly rare events which all of them at least refer to. Luke, whose version we've just heard, follows very closely that of Mark, the earliest. But Luke adds that it's after Jesus has been baptised and is praying that the voice and the dove come down from heaven. Matthew offers us an expanded account in which John challenges Jesus with the words, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" To this Jesus gives a somewhat puzzling reply, "Let it be so for now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." (3.14-15) Matthew also differs from Mark and Luke in the way he reports the words of the voice from heaven. They both tell us that it speaks to Jesus himself, "You are my Son", words known to the Jews because they appear in Psalm 2, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"(7) In Matthew, however, the voice addresses the other people present, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."(3.17)

Just to complete the picture, John's gospel doesn't specifically tell us that John the Baptist baptised Jesus. But the Baptist is reported as saying that he saw the dove descend and indeed remain on Jesus. And, although Luke's gospel has told us that Jesus' and John's mothers are relatives, the fourth gospel indicates that their sons have not met until this encounter by the River Jordan. For John says, "I myself did not know him; but I came baptising with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel." (1.31) Indeed as soon as he sees Jesus approaching he announces, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."(29)

So much for the various accounts of the event of Jesus' baptism. But what does it tell us about him? And does it make any difference to us? First we return to his enigmatic words that he came to be baptised "to fulfil all righteousness". Perhaps not surprisingly commentators can't agree exactly what this means. Among a variety of suggestions the one I find most satisfactory is, "...for (Jesus) baptism is not for the washing away of sins, but the anointing of the Servant of Jehovah for his office in accordance with the prophecy of Isaiah". (Green p 117) The prophecy in question says, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me: he has sent me to bring good news to the poor..." 61.1) These are very words Luke will show us Jesus reading out in the synagogue at Nazareth and telling the worshippers that they are being fulfilled by him.(4.21)

I was fortunate enough when I was ordained priest to receive anointing of my hands by the bishop. (It doesn't always happen.) And his words were, "May God, who anointed Christ at his baptism, anoint and empower you for the blessing of his people." I need hardly tell you that it was the most humbling and cherished moment of my entire life. We can easily imagine that this was an incomparable experience in the earthly life of Jesus. Here he was being commissioned for the ministry he was sent to carry out. Doubtless his parents had tried to prepare him for his unique calling, as far as they understood it. And certainly his reading of the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms, together with long periods of prayer to the Father, would have brought him to this point. And now the Father owns him as his beloved Son and affirms him for the task he is sent to perform. This is a moment he will look back to whenever he is assailed by doubt or temptation. And it will renew his strength.

Earlier I posed the question "Why did Jesus come and join the sinners to be baptised?" and I said "the answer lies in the question." The purpose of Jesus' life and ministry was precisely to join us sinners, to share our human life with no special favours or privileges, and to offer it back to God on behalf of us all. The incarnation, God sharing a human life, involves solidarity with human beings and therefore necessarily with sinners. Although we believe that Jesus himself was not a sinner, he accepted the consequences as if he were. He offered himself to be baptised alongside a crowd of sinners as a public demonstration of that solidarity with the whole human race, with you and with me. St Paul well understood this as he boldly stated, "Christ was innocent of sin, and yet for our sake God made him one with the sinfulness of (mortals), so that in him we might be made one with the goodness of God himself." (2 Cor 5.21 NEB).

Although the baptism we receive is not the same as Christ's, there is a clear connection. He was baptised in order to draw as close as possible to us. We are baptised in order to be as close as possible to him. In other words it's where our humanity and his divinity meet. It's a reminder that God's will is to be constantly with us.

You'll remember those thrilling words from our first reading: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you."(43.2) Jesus passed through the River Jordan for our sake. He went under the waters of death, so that we should not have to do so alone. As Jesus came up out the water his Father's voice declared that he was his Son, his Beloved, with whom he was well pleased. As we are baptised he calls us by name. We are his.

Colin James