

## **Baptism of the Lord - 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday of the Epiphany**

**Isaiah 42:1–9; Acts 10:34–43; Matthew 3:13–17**

### ***The baptism that wasn't meant to happen***

So far in Matthew's story we've been hearing about Jesus the baby. Now we fast forward and meet the man. Jesus has arrived at the Jordan river where John was doing what John did – baptising. It was a baptism for repentance. Translated, it was a way of people showing that they were turning their lives around and getting ready for the kingdom of heaven. It was about changing their way of living and preparing for the arrival of the Messiah. John was merely a stagehand in the divine drama. The one who was to come was the main character, and when he arrived on the scene, he would ignite the kingdom life within people. He'd bring God's wind and fire, cleaning up the mess and sweeping all before him. The expectations were big. Now he's arrived. But hang on. ... He asks to be baptised by John. John is gobsmacked. This isn't what's meant to happen. Here is Jesus – the Son of God, the Messiah, the Chosen One – asking John to baptise him – to go through a rite that was for people who were acknowledging that they sinners and faced divine judgement. John objects. "I'm the one who needs to be baptized, not *you!*" But Jesus insists. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So John goes ahead and baptises Jesus.

Why is Jesus acting as if he's a sinner and in need of forgiveness? New Testament writers tell us, very clearly, that Jesus was like us in all things, *except* that he was 'without sin'.<sup>1</sup> He came 'to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.'<sup>2</sup> No wonder John is taken aback. A century or so later, Jesus' baptism was still making some Christians feel uneasy. In the Gospel of the Hebrews (a Gospel that didn't make it into the Bible), Jesus denies that he needs to repent and suggests that he went through with it to please his mother.

So, what's going on here? There's a clue in the geographical location of where this event took place. Jesus was baptised in the Jordan, which is located in the northern part of the great Rift Valley, being the lowest place on earth. Here, in this great depression, Jesus was identified as God's Beloved Son. It's a geographical metaphor of the place that Jesus was prepared to take in order to fulfil his work.

You recall how the name, Jesus, means 'save'. Jesus would 'save his people from their sins.'<sup>3</sup> His willingness to be baptised is an act of solidarity with sinners. Here is Emmanuel, God-with-us, identifying with us – even with our faults and failures – with us in all the separates us from God and one another. By wading into the waters Jesus takes his place beside us and among us. He becomes one with us.

Not long into his work, the religious leaders criticised Jesus. "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!"<sup>4</sup> And they were right. His baptism is an acted-out parable of who he is, the champion of those whom society despises and rejects. In the waters of the Jordan River, at the lowest part of the earth, the Beloved of God takes the lowest place in human life. Jesus, who was born, lived and died without spot of sin, was humbling himself in solidarity with humankind in all its sinfulness, failure and despair. Here we see him standing shoulder to shoulder with us in our weaknesses, in our fears and anxieties, sharing the full condition of our humanity. Jesus is in touch with our reality. To paraphrase how the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: 'He's been through weakness

---

<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 4:15b

<sup>2</sup> 1 John 3:5

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:21

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 11:19

and testing, experienced it all – all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.<sup>5</sup>

Still wet from having been plunged by John beneath the waters of the Jordan, Jesus heard a voice and saw a vision: 'the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." These words echo the prophecy of Isaiah. 'Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him.'<sup>6</sup> Matthew is telling us, here in Jesus, is the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy – here is the servant of God.

In these early chapters of his Gospel, Matthew is saying in different ways who Jesus is, and in his baptism all these descriptions come together: Jesus is the One who has come to save us from sins, from all that separates us from God; here is Emmanuel, God-with-us, standing in solidarity with us, sharing our lives; here is God's servant and God's beloved Son, and here he begins his ministry. Peter's speech, that's recounted in the reading from Acts, tells of how that ministry unfolds, culminates in his 'death, by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day'.

Jesus' baptism is the first step on that road, as it was for us. Our baptism was the start of journey with Jesus. Earlier, we made a statement about what our baptism means:

God of justice and compassion,  
you give us a work to do  
and a baptism of suffering and resurrection.  
From you comes power to give to others  
the care we have ourselves received  
so that we, and all who love your world,  
may live in harmony and trust.<sup>7</sup>

Our baptism declares who we are: God's beloved children – children of God who is with us, who saves, who shares our lives and will never let us go. Our baptism affirms our identity and gives us a work to do – a share in Christ's servant work; a share in his suffering and resurrection; a call to give to others the compassionate care God gives to us.

Have you noticed how the font, which is located at the entrance of the church, is always uncovered, and it's always filled with water? It's a reminder of how we received our calling as God's children. It can be hard to hold on to that identity. As a tangible reminder of who we are, and of what Jesus is to us, as you leave and / or enter this place, pause at the font. Put your hand in the water and perhaps make the sign of the cross on your forehead, and remember that you are God's beloved child with whom God is well pleased – that God has called you to share in Christ's servant ministry, giving you the power to give to others and to live as the beloved daughters and sons of God.

*Alister Hendery  
St Matthew's, Hastings – 12.1.2020*

---

<sup>5</sup> see Hebrews 4:15–16

<sup>6</sup> Isaiah 42:1

<sup>7</sup> ANZPB-HKMoA, 478