

Baptism of the Lord. Matthew 3:13-17 (Year A. 2020)

The Baptism of Jesus

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw 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.'

The story so far, according to Matthew:

The Gospel begins Chapter 1, verse 1 with these words: 'An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham' and the long genealogy that follows, outlines that relationship. Matthew, of all of the Gospels, is concerned to show that Jesus is the legitimate heir to the house of David, and is therefore, for Matthew's community the awaited messiah.

Then the story goes on:

Mary and Joseph were betrothed. Mary found she was pregnant before they were married. Nevertheless they married, and Jesus was born. Shortly after this they heard, through an angel appearing in a dream to Joseph, that Herod was planning to kill all the young male children in Bethlehem; so the family fled to Egypt. When they returned to Palestine they settled in Nazareth. My Bible says this is to fulfill the prophecy that 'he' Jesus, will be called a Nazorean. This occurs at the end of chapter 2 of Matthew.

The next chapter, 3, begins the story of John the Baptist, who took up residence in the wilderness, by the Jordan river. We are all familiar with the words *The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight*, and John's clothing of camel hair and diet of wild honey.

But perhaps we're not so familiar with the Jewish rituals of immersion in water for repentance for cleansing for purifying. The Qumran community where some think John lived for a time, (the place the Dead Sea scrolls came from) practised ritual washing as part of their daily routines. And so maybe it's not surprising, although it must have been, because it's written about in

Matthew's Gospel, that *the people of Judea and Jerusalem were going out to him to be baptised in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.* (Matt:3:5,6)

And the cleansing saving qualities of water are a continuing theme through the story of the people of God throughout the First testament: In Genesis the spirit hovered over the waters; the waters of the Red sea parted to allow the people Israel to move to freedom in the promised land, Moses touched a rock with his staff and saving water appeared and so on.

In today's text Jesus came from the Galilee to Jordan to be baptised by John. There's a little bit of a conversation about the appropriateness of John baptising Jesus, nevertheless John baptises Jesus, and as Jesus comes up out of the water the Spirit of God descends upon him and a voice from heaven says: *This is my Son, my beloved with whom I am well pleased.* (Matthew 3:17)

Lets just hover on this phrase *This is my Son, my beloved with whom I am well pleased* for a minute. At the very least God is accepting Jesus into a very favoured relationship – giving him the label 'favoured son'. You can't do better than that. God is singling Jesus out for unique favour, for special approval. God is declaring Jesus 'beloved' and a 'Son' informing the world, because this baptism was a public event, that Jesus enjoys unique honour, status, and a role ascribed by God.

We find that phrase *with whom I am well pleased* earlier in the Bible in David's relationship with God, and also the genealogy at the beginning of Matthew, in which Jesus relationship to David is explained, is emphasised. David had a special relationship with God, Jesus has a special favouritism.

Immediately after his baptism, Jesus withdrew into the wilderness for a period of fasting, and one assumes prayer, reflection and contemplation.

Much of our theology of Baptism, that is our understanding of Baptism comes from today's Gospel passage. And there is alot to be said about Baptism, a great deal of it not neccesarilly related to what we think about every day. But today's question has to be what does Baptism qualify us for? What difference does it make to our lives?

Firstly Christians are 'called to be a community' and here I stress *community* we are 'called to be a community capable of forming people with virtues sufficient to witness to God's truth in the world'¹.

I cannot emphasise this enough: baptism is a communal act. In our baptism service we make promises as a community to the person being baptised. We promise to share what we ourselves have received, 'a delight in prayer, a love for the word of God, a desire to follow Christ and food for the journey'. And that is why, by and large, private baptisms and the baptism of children who live somewhere else, doesn't make much sense. The community cannot foster 'delight in prayer a love for the word of God' and so on... if the child or person who is baptised is unknown to them, or we see them, family arrangements allowing, once or twice a year.

So what difference does this act of Baptism, Jesus baptism make to us? The first communities of Christians, lets say Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, the communities of Acts and so on, when they wanted to talk, write, about the difference Jesus had made, wrote, spoke of his teachings, and healings and miracles as indicating the quality, the character, and the closeness, the nearness, of God's kingdom. They didn't write alot about Jesus, they didn't call attention to his person, but rather to the kingdom that the early Christians felt had been made present and yet was still to come, when Jesus preached and acted.

Let me give you an example of that preaching:

In Matthew 5 we learn to be like God by following the teachings of Jesus and learning to be disciples. I say learning because we all know its a daily journey:

Listen to this:

You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

Love for Enemies

¹ Hauervas S., cited in Garrett G. *Feasting on the Word...*p241

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

I think you will remember these ethical teachings, but I’m not sure you will remember the end bit *Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*

We are called to be like God perfect as God is perfect. And we learn to do this by following the man who God sent as the forerunner in the kingdom. So everytime we carry out acts of forgiveness and charity we are bringing about, as much as we can, the nearness of God’s kingdom.

Finally we are called, by our baptism, to be a community capable of forming people who will witness to God’s truth. A couple of weeks ago I talked about a Palestinian Christian community called the Tent of all Nations, whom we visited on the West Bank, who had a sign at their gate saying ‘We refuse to retaliate’. The Israeli settlers who live around them want the community’s land and so persist with acts of petty, yet expensive, nastiness. The settlers, for example, cut down 150 of their, The Tent of all Nations, olive trees, just before the harvest. The Tent of all nations community retaliated by planting another 150 trees. A pretty exact example of how to live out that turn the other cheek teaching, and therefore to live as if the kingdom of God is imminent.

We don’t live in such extreme circumstances. Our community is placed in societal contexts that are far more subtle and perhaps far more complex.

The story *To kill a Mockingbird* offers a mirror of some of our complexity. It’s a story set in the American South during the great depression. Scout Finch, a child of around ten, and her brother Gem, children of a wealthy educated family, have their values and ethics formed by the attitudes of their father Atticus and their maid Calpurnia. It’s a complex and subtle story, and or, but, we too to live in complex and morally subtle times. But one of the less subtle points of *To kill a Mockingbird* is learning and practicing to see the world through another’s eyes.

And as we move through that story, and others like it, and reflect on that story, and others like it, we can see that a community, like ours; wealthy, educated and privileged has the potential to form people to be people of tolerance, love, and bravery: living as if the kingdom of God were here -

Or: to be people of fear, bigotry, and greed.

So how do we, a baptised community, or a community of the baptised, live as if the Kingdom of God were near? Or already here?

One way, is to use our influence for the good of others.

Most of the week I spend thinking about or doing parish and church administration. About half my time is spent doing that. A lesser part of my time, as you know, is spent dealing in some way with the destitute; the homeless; people who sleep in cars; people who have crowded into a relatives or friends house; the people who have been to WINZ and been turned down; the people who have been turned down by the foodbank. The not being able to live on a benefit is not this years story, it's not this decade's story. But the 40,000 homeless people in New Zealand is a new story.

How we got here is complex. How we as a society is going to get out of it is complex. But if we educated people of influence don't do something about it, don't try and use our influence to push for change – more social housing – more sheltered housing – a lift in benefits, then our baptism and the potential it has to enable us to bring about the kingdom of God, is for naught.

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