The Baptism of Jesus- Matthew 3:13-17

PRAY

*Just a reminder that the sermons at 10.45am. are usually recorded and uploaded to All Saints website within a day or so of being preached. Listen again/ catch up if you missed it.*

*And the text of this sermon will also be available as a word document if that saves you taking notes.*

The church’s season of Lent begins on Wednesday and we begin a new sermon series today called “The Way of the Lord”. In it we hope to look at some of the journeys that Jesus made and, in particular, at some of the encounters that he had along the way. We begin today with the baptism of Jesus.

So we are in Matthew ch. 3, reading from v. 13:

**SLIDE 1**

**13Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”**

**15Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.” Then John consented.**

This is a puzzling encounter. Jesus is somewhere around thirty years old. His public ministry hasn’t yet begun, and he has been up in the north of Israel in Galilee. Roughly 70 miles to the south, John the Baptist is preaching and baptising where the River Jordan runs through the Desert of Judea, not far from Jerusalem.

What do we know about John the Baptist and what was he doing? Just six months older than Jesus, his own birth and life had been remarkable.

One day an angel appeared to his father, Zechariah, and told him that he and his wife, Elizabeth, who were both elderly and had no children, would have a son. The angel was specific that the baby should be called John and said this,

**SLIDES 2 + 3**

**14He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, 15for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. 16He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. 17And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”** (Luke 1: 14-17)

**“…to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”** That tells us what John the Baptist is going to do.

Zechariah his father then messes up by not believing the angel, but that’s a different part of the story, and eventually John is born.

As for John’s life after that, Luke tells us,

**80And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the wilderness (desert) until he appeared publicly to Israel**.

(Luke 1)

**SLIDE 4 John the Baptist**

Matthew adds

**4John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. (**Matthew 3:4-5)

John was a desert person. Did he live in a desert community? Was he simply a loner who learned to fend for himself and who didn’t need other people’s company? We don’t know. But we do know that John had a mission, and that mission was to prepare the people of Israel for the one who was to come.

And John’s message was **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” …** (Matthew 3:2)

**“I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire…”** (Matthew 3:11)

**Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John.** (Matthew 3:13)

**SLIDE 5 Jesus**

So John’s message was **REPENT**. Look at your lives; look at your hearts; look at your motives; look at your actions. And if you are grieved by anything you see there, come and be baptised as a sign of your sorrow and your willingness to turn from what is wrong.

I am just going to leave the baptism of Jesus here to say a word about Lent, but I will come back.

Left to myself, I would cheerfully pass from the pancakes of Shrove Tuesday to the chocolate eggs of Easter Sunday, with no gap in between. But there is actually a period of six-and-a-half weeks between those two occasions, and Christians regard this in-between period, Lent, as a time for a personal spiritual check up.

A lot of Christians give something up. But what’s the point of giving something up, or fasting, to use the Bible’s word?

A writer called CS Lewis explains it like this, and it has two steps or stages.

We all have lots of appetites.

Smell of chips …

Something in shop window…

You can apply that to every area of life – sex, alcohol, ambition, money – you name it.

Appetites like the tentacles of octopus.

But if we satisfy our appetites without any self-control, they can pretty quickly lead us, and others, into trouble.

So **step 1**: we give something up – and it may only be something small -- so that we can become more self-controlled.

**Step 2**: once we have gained some more self-control, we offer ourselves again to God so that we can be of more use to him.

I think we often miss the second step, but it’s important because if we just give something up for the sake of giving it up, that may make us proud rather than humble. “**I fast twice a week”** boasted one Pharisee in Luke’s gospel (Luke 18:12), and his fasting made him proud and not humble.

But if we realise that the aim then is to give ourselves back to God even more intentionally for his use, then hopefully our fasting will serve its proper purpose.

Before we get back to the baptism of Jesus let me end this section with a picture: wild horse; broken horse.

I was saying earlier that John the Baptist could only offer baptism to show sorrow for sins.

**BUT**, and it’s a big but, John could not offer forgiveness. John’s baptism was preparing people for the work that Jesus would do in bringing forgiveness. So the baptism of John is different from what we understand by Christian baptism.

So let’s look at the meeting between Jesus and John.

**13Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. 14But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”**

**15Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.” Then John consented.**

John recognised Jesus as the Messiah; indeed the very name Jesus, meaning ‘God saves’, had been given to him before birth precisely because he would save his people from their sins.

So when Jesus comes to John for baptism, John is flummoxed

**14… John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”**

* Jesus was without sin, so why was he coming forward to receive a baptism of repentance? He had nothing to repent of.
* Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit, so why was he coming to someone who could only baptise with water. It made no sense to John.

How does Jesus answer him?

**15Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.”**

This is a rather cryptic reply. The explanation that helps me is this: Although Jesus had no sin of his own and did not therefore need to repent, he did want to identify with those who were seeking this new spiritual beginning. He wanted to show solidarity with this hunger for God, and the way to do that was to be baptised along with everybody else.

Jesus doesn’t have an argument with John. In essence he just says

***“Let it be, John. If I am to fulfil God’s plan it is helpful that I take this step.”***

So John agrees and Jesus is baptised. (submersion in river)

**SLIDE 6 Baptism**

**16As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”**

**SLIDE 7 Baptism + misty dove**

As Jesus comes up out of the river, he saw heaven being opened. Indeed Mark, in his account of this moment, says that heaven was ‘torn open’, like you would rip a piece of cloth, so there is something dramatic taking place. And the Spirit of God descended like a dove and rested on Jesus. And a voice from heaven (the voice of God) was heard to say, **This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”**

It will not be long before Jesus embarks on his public ministry. Here, as he steps out of obscurity he receives the ringing endorsement of God the Father who has sent him.

Let’s look at the details a bit more closely:

1. As heaven opens the Holy Spirit, the spirit of God, is seen to descend in the form of a dove. It is not that Jesus does not already have the Spirit – indeed he was conceived by the Holy Spirit. But I think that the Holy Spirit descending at this moment is a sign of the bond and communication between Father and Son. God is one, and yet we see God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit all working in perfect unity.

2. Those present who knew their Old Testament scriptures would prick up their ears here. Isaiah, prophesying 700 years earlier about the One who was to come, on three occasions mentions the presence of the Holy Spirit as being one of the marks of the Messiah. God could surely not make it any clearer that Jesus was that person.

3. What about the words that are heard from heaven? These again pick up words from the Old Testament.

**“This is my Son, whom I love;**

So God declares Jesus to be his Son and declares his love for him

Love describes the essential relationship between God the Father and God the Son. God is not cold, impersonal, distant. He loves the Son, just as he loves the world, in all its mess. That is his core. But God is God. And when both John the Baptist and Jesus speak on other occasions about the wrath of God, the judgement of God, they bear witness to the fact that we human beings need saving and that is urgent business.

4. Lastly, the voice from heaven, having said, **“This is my Son whom I love”** says, **“in whom I am well pleased.”**

Not only does God the Father declare his love for his Son, but the Son has come to earth on a mission from the Father, a mission that will take Jesus to the cross. And the Father declares his pleasure at how the plan is unfolding.

Surely no-one who witnessed these events could have any doubt about the credentials of Jesus.

Following the baptism of Jesus the very next words that we read are these:”**Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be temptedby the devil.”** (Matthew 4:1)

And that is the topic for next week.

**SLIDE 8 (briefly) Credits**