

*the beloved son*  
a sermon preached on the  
*feast of the baptism of our lord*  
15 January 2017  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by dr muriel porter*

The lections: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10: 34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus' baptism by John the Baptizer was clearly an important event in our Lord's life, because the three synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke – all record it, in similar fashion.<sup>1</sup> There is also an indirect account in St John's Gospel.<sup>2</sup> Today's Gospel reading from Matthew gives us the most detailed of all these reports.

His baptism presents a theological problem that has agonized theologians down the centuries: if Jesus was sinless, why would he undergo a baptism of repentance, such as John offered in the River Jordan? You may recall that we focused on John the Baptizer's baptismal ministry during Advent.

Why was Jesus baptized? Various explanations have been offered, the most prominent of which we have already sung this morning in the opening words of the gathering hymn: "Christ, when for us you were baptized..." Put simply, this argument is that Jesus, although sinless, was deliberately aligning himself with sinful humanity<sup>3</sup> as a kind of demonstration to us that we need this baptism of repentance, even if he really didn't.

This idea certainly has merit, if it helps us focus on Jesus' own real humanity, a further manifestation of Jesus as God among us fully human, as well as fully divine. The voice from heaven, declaring that Jesus is God's Son, the beloved – a feature of all four Gospel accounts – is a manifestation of his divine identity. Put the two things together – the fully human Jesus identifying with the rest of humanity and the declaration of his divine Sonship – and we have a crystal clear epiphany – revelation – of the incarnation.

But to my mind if we stop at this explanation, valuable as it is, then we risk missing other aspects of this infinitely rich event.

Let's go back to our Advent encounter with John baptizing in the Jordan. His baptism of repentance was something radically new. It symbolised a radical change of direction, a change of mind and heart, a "turning away from one way of being and doing and facing in a new and better direction".<sup>4</sup> Although this baptism would be a one-off event, the change it symbolised was to be permanent, not transient – it was a "lifelong disruption".<sup>5</sup>

Increasingly in recent times, we have come to see 'repentance' in this light – as a 'turning in a new direction', a change of mind and heart – rather than 'saying sorry for our sins'. Saying sorry for sin should involve a change of mind and heart, a turning in a new direction, so the two meanings are closely connected. But repentance is much bigger than saying sorry. Sadly, however, the Christian church very early on became obsessed with sin, with the end result that it equated baptism almost solely as a ritual for washing away sin. In the early centuries, some new Christians became so obsessed with their innate sinfulness that they would not be baptized until they were on the point of death, to ensure that there was no opportunity for them to sin again after their baptismal cleansing! So it is no wonder that

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22

<sup>2</sup> John 1:29-33

<sup>3</sup> John W. Martens, 'Baptized by You', *America*, January 6-13 2014, p.38

<sup>4</sup> Paula Gooder, *The Meaning is in the Waiting: the Spirit of Advent*, Canterbury Press, Norwich, 2008 p.95

<sup>5</sup> Paula Gooder, p.95

theologians were troubled about the sinless Jesus being baptized. If however we see John's baptism as symbolizing a permanent, sacramental commitment to a new direction, then we can see Jesus' baptism in an entirely different light.

Jesus' appearance among the crowds coming for baptism at the Jordan is our first sight of him as an adult. We have no idea what he had been doing in his adult years until, when he was about 30,<sup>6</sup> he turned up at the Jordan. His baptism marks his arrival on the scene, ready to commence his ministry.

Let's just stop here for a moment, and see Jesus joining the crowds gathering around John at the river. He had come from Galilee – a fair distance away, several days' walk – and would have been hot, dusty and tired. This journey, this baptism, was clearly important to him. No doubt he came grappling with who he was, and what his calling was. And he needed this public rite as he struggled with what was to be a huge change in his life. How very, very human!

John's baptism rite was nothing like the polite ritual we Anglicans use. It was not a gentle caressing of the forehead with a little splash of water. No, it was a full immersion, as John unceremoniously pushed the baptismal candidate right under the water. This was the practice of the early Church, for some centuries, and still is the normative practice for the Eastern Orthodox Church and some other Christian traditions. It has been described as quite terrifying, akin to being in danger of drowning. The person being baptized experiences the full double-edged power of the primary baptismal symbol, water. Water's dangerous, destructive force washes away the person's old identity, often described in Christian theology as a kind of death; the new person, the person who has been raised in Christ, is re-created from the life-giving waters, which is why the early Church preferred baptism to be performed in living, running water such as a river.

Orthodox Church mosaics of the baptism of Jesus depict the waters he entered as the dwelling place of the monsters that threaten human life; they show Jesus trampling them down. So his descent into the water is seen as a pre-figuring of his death, which destroyed our death, and his rising from the water as a foretaste of his, and our, resurrection.<sup>7</sup> That of course, is how theologians would later interpret his baptism.

So there in the Jordan River, we can see Jesus deliberately, ritually, turning his life in another direction, turning fully towards God. And the voice he heard from heaven as he came up from the water – “This is my Son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased” – confirmed that new direction, inaugurating his mission publicly, setting him on the path that would lead to the cross and empty tomb. Immediately after his baptism, we are told, he was led by the Spirit into the wilderness where for 40 days – in other words, for a long time – he grappled further with how he was to exercise his earthly ministry, rejecting all the temptations to exercise it through gimmickry, through power and control.<sup>8</sup>

Baptism sets us apart for ministry too. It is the ordination of the people of God, the primary ordination. The Protestant reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century reclaimed this biblical truth with their doctrine of the priesthood of all believers.<sup>9</sup> Yes, we lay people are also ordained for ministry, through our baptism, when we are signed with the sign of the cross and marked as Christ's own forever.

How can we respond personally to Jesus' baptism? What does it say to us? Each year, as part of our Easter liturgies, we reaffirm our baptismal promises. May I suggest that a good way to respond to today's Gospel is to find a quiet moment during the coming week to remember your baptismal commitment? The promises we reaffirm at Easter are quite simple: we reaffirm our renunciation of evil and renew our commitment to Jesus Christ; and then we promise, with God's help, to continue in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 3:23

<sup>7</sup> Robin Green, *Only Connect: Worship and Liturgy from the Perspective of Pastoral Care*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1987, p.55

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 4:1-11

<sup>9</sup> 1 Peter 2:9: “But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”

of bread and in the prayers; to persevere in resisting evil, and whenever we fail, to repent and turn again to the Lord; to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ; to seek to serve Christ by loving our neighbour as ourselves; to work and pray for justice and peace among all people, and to respect the dignity of every person. If we try seriously to live by these promises, we are living daily in Christ, exercising the ministry for which we were ordained in baptism.

And as we renew our commitment, may we too hear in our hearts the words of our Lord to us: "You also are my beloved child; with you too I am well pleased".