

St George's Anglican Church Malvern.

The Baptism of our Lord Yr A

Most of the people who went out to see John the Baptist down at the Jordan River came from nearby – Jerusalem and the Judean hills. Jesus walked from Galilee. It would have taken three or four days. No one walks that distance unless their journey really matters.

When Jesus stands before John we don't know if they have met before or not. It is only Luke who calls them 'cousins'. This is Matthew's story about Jesus. John, so ready to baptise any who come to him, hesitates. 'I need to be baptised by you' John says to this man, about whom he has been speaking, and who now suddenly emerges from the crowd.

John has been plunging people under the water of the Jordan as preparation for God's coming. What he is doing is not Christian baptism. In truth, today would be better named 'The Sunday of the Beloved Son'. It is Jewish ritual and it is more like the ritual bathing and washing that was common and frequent among the Jewish people than Christian baptism.

Washing is very important in Jewish practice, even today. I was once with some Jewish men on a NSW government academic accreditation panel for the Sydney Yeshiva. When the lunch was brought in the Jewish men were told, 'It's washing to the elbows'. They were all from different Jewish communities and had to be told what was required ritually in that one!

People collected rain water to use for their ritual cleansing if they had no access to running water. Better off people built baths in their houses that were set apart for ritual use. Others went to public pools, as Jesus himself did. He sent the man born blind (from John's gospel) to wash his eyes in the Pool of Siloam, which still exists in Jerusalem today.

Now John had rightly discerned that his people needed to turn their hearts around and re-orient their lives to God. The Prophets constantly called the people back to renew their special relationship with God. And John says that a stronger One than he is coming who will winnow and sift the people, sorting out the righteous from the unjust. It sounds very threatening but it is only meant to be that to people who turn their backs on God's ways. For those oppressed and scorned by the haughty wrongdoers, it is good news. God is coming and the world will be sorted out and set to rights.

Be ready John preached, be ready for this, bear the fruit of that turning around, of that repentance in your lives, and be part of what God is doing. Don't be chaff that blows away because it is useless. And to show that you mean business, that you commit to God's next big thing, enter the Jordan and recross it. Do symbolically what our ancestors did historically to show that you are willing to take part in this renewal of a right relationship with God. Be ready for the One who is coming to do all this with God and for God, not with water, but through the Holy Spirit.

And so, Jesus appears. 'Baptise me', he says to John, 'so that I may fulfil all righteousness.' The first words of the adult Jesus in this gospel say that for now, it is right that I do what God wants. A righteous person kept the teachings of Torah – usually misnamed 'law' better called 'wisdom for living God's way' - because Torah is the practical expression of God's purposes and intentions for we humans. It is what God wants for us. Later, Jesus and his disciples will make enemies of those who understand this intention legalistically, not holistically.

What God wants in this moment is for Jesus to identify with those in Israel who are turning to God. Well, Jesus may well identify with the crowds John has drawn, but as he emerges from the water, he is set apart by the opening of the heavens, the descent of the Spirit as it were in the form of a dove and God's voice proclaiming him 'beloved son' and 'well pleasing.'

This is a defining moment in Matthew's gospel story: it is the divine response to Jesus' righteousness. And the symbolism says here is a new creation. The heavens open after a long drought of God's seeming silence ever since the people had returned from exile in Babylon. For centuries they had prayed, 'O that you would tear open the heavens and come down' and now that prayer is answered. For centuries they had recited the great poem of creation in which all that God made began with the hovering of the Spirit, as a dove hovers, over the waters of the deep. Here is a renewal so profound, so far reaching, that it will amount to a new creation. The Spirit empowered life of this man will reclaim, not just his own people, but all peoples for a new humanity to be lived out in a renewed people of God.

The highpoint comes with the words from heaven: this is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased. This Jesus is messiah, son of David and uniquely 'son' of God, a title Matthew has already made clear in the stories of Jesus' birth and will set forth for us in his gospel.

It is as if we are allowed to eavesdrop on an intimate moment in Jesus' relationship with God. Those words 'the beloved' and 'well pleased' speak of a depth of love and knowledge that those who have been well enough parented can identify with. But even if that has not been your experience, these words are now spoken to all of us. Each one of us, before we say or do any good thing in God's power can take this divine assurance to heart. Before all else and above all else we are God's beloved, and God is pleased that we have ever taken breath.

Does that mean a life of ease, of nothing going wrong, of plain sailing – of course not! Does it mean a life assured of God's presence in every moment – yes, it can! Jesus will suffer for his readiness to do what God wants. He will come to be identified with the suffering servant of Isaiah's prophecies whose faithful life is eventually vindicated by God. Later Paul will write to the Romans to say 'suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.' (Rom. 5. 4-5) The writer of the letter to the Hebrews will say this: you need endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, [what God wants] you may receive what was promised. (Hebrews 10.36).

Matthew would have us understand at the outset that this Jesus, who walked four days to get to the place where John was baptising, who was plunged under the water with the rest of those turning their lives towards God, rises from the river, dripping wet, as the One John has spoken about and the One through whom God speaks to us all to call us 'beloved' and 'pleasing'. Is that a testimony you can ignore, a voice you want to resist?

No, I thought not...