

Why are we Baptised?

So - *“Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan River. He presented himself to John and asked to be baptised. At first John wouldn’t have a bar of it, saying, “You’ve got it all back to front. It is me that needs to be baptised by you.”*

.....But Jesus insisted, saying, “For now, it is the right thing to do. Baptise me, for it is fitting for us to do all that God asks of anyone.

.....So John gave in and baptised Jesus. As he came up from the water, he saw the sky suddenly opening up and the Spirit of God coming down like a diving kookaburra and taking hold of him. And a voice filled the air, saying, “You are my Son; my love personified. You fill me with pride.”

This morning's gospel reading is one of those seemingly innocuous little passages that you can read and think “Oh yeah, I remember that,” and keep right on reading waiting for the next good bit; a fight with the Pharisees or a display of incompetence by the disciples or something. But like most seemingly innocuous little passages, a bit more contemplation shows that there is a lot more to it than just an interlude between conflict stories.

The story of Jesus being baptised by John in the Jordan is one of the most certain stories in the whole gospels. Even the most sceptical scholars, who dismiss most of the Jesus stories as legends, believe that this one was an actual event. They might question some of the details but they believe that Jesus was baptised by John. A few years ago a great biblical scholar by the name of Sanders set about making a list of all the things about Jesus life that no-one seriously doubted the truth of. He managed to come up with a list of twelve things. The twelve included some fairly obvious things like “he was born” and “he was executed”. It also included “he had disciples” and “he was involved in some sort of conflict over the temple” and sure enough there on the list of things that no-one argues about, “he was baptised by John.”

Now for our purposes here it is worth noting how people like Sanders come up with these lists. One of the criteria for a story making the list is how well attested it is. The baptism story does well here because it is told in all four of the gospels as well as in some of the apocryphal gospels. Then there is a criteria that works hand in hand with that one. If a story is a bit embarrassing, or causes a bunch of theological problems, and still gets told then it is more likely to be true, and if it is embarrassing but still get told by everybody then it is almost certain to be true, so the scholars reckon. Now this makes a lot of sense when you think about it, because we all edit the stories we tell as we go. For example Mark has a story about Jesus healing a blind man and the first

time he tries the blind man can only see people looking like walking trees, so he has another go and the blind man is completely healed. Not surprisingly that is the one and only miracle story from Mark that both Matthew and Luke leave out when they do full revisions of Mark to produce their own gospels. The story is an embarrassment to them; how do you explain that the Son of God had an off day and messed up a healing and had to have a second go. Too hard, so they leave it out completely.

Now the story of the baptism is a little bit like that. You would understand if someone left it out because it really causes some problems. You see John's baptism was for repentance and for forgiveness of sins, so Jesus feeling the need to be baptised by John implies that he had something to repent of and some sins to be forgiven. And although the scriptures never make much of an issue of it, the tradition developed very very early in the church that Jesus never sinned in his whole life. And to make matters worse, being baptised by someone implied some sort of submission to their authority and so the idea of Jesus submitting to John's authority caused some problems too.

You can see the evidence of this problem here in Matthew's account of the baptism. Obviously by the time Matthew wrote it down there was a bit of controversy floating around about this story and some people were wanting to strike it from the records. If you compare Matthew's version to Mark's, which if anyone is wanting to look it up now is in Chapter 1 verse 9 on, you'll notice that Matthew has added a few extra details to try an answer the critics. Only Matthew's version has John refusing to baptise Jesus and saying "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" and then Jesus replying, "Let it be so for now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." Like lots of things, you fix one problem and you create another and Matthew has now left the story open to a different criticism, that Jesus went through a significant religious ritual in a meaningless and hollow way for the sake of public appearances.

So for what ever reason, it is clear that this baptism story is far to much of a nuisance for any one to have made it up, because if they had, no-one else would have used it. So the scholars conclude that because it causes serious problems for the Christian image of Jesus, but everyone tells it anyway, then even if you're the most vehement atheist you can rest assured that someone called Jesus of Nazareth got baptised by John the Baptist somewhere around the year thirty of the common era. And any of you who only listen to sermons to find out whether the preacher believes the bible or not can now all go home

secure in the knowledge that I believe that Jesus was baptised by John and that probably everyone else in the church is more or less convinced of that now too.

But, all jokes aside, as I said two weeks ago, none of these stories were written down merely because they happened, but because they mean something. In this case the fact that it is written down is fairly solid evidence that it happened, but that was not why it was written down. Mere details of recorded history can be terribly tedious reading. We don't care whether Jesus took his sandals off before entering the water or not, we want to know what it all means, how it shaped Jesus ministry, what impact it had on his mission and how it affects our calling as disciples now.

This story is the first major crossroad in the gospel journey. Matthew, like all the other gospel writers starts his story of Jesus adult ministry with John the baptiser. We have no records of Jesus between the age of twelve and his encounter with John approximately eighteen years later. In Matthew we don't even have the records of him at age twelve.

John's ministry started before Jesus' and was obviously very significant, because all the gospel writers see it as necessary to give some sort of explanation of how Jesus emerged from John's movement and how the two related to one another. In Matthew's story this is the change over point. This is where the baton is passed from one to the next. We have a movement centred around John, but then after he baptises Jesus there is this change over and in John's own words, he decreases and Jesus increases.

John was a wild man. He lived a radical ascetic lifestyle, living in the desert, wearing beggar's clothes and eating bush tucker. He preached a fiery message of the wrath of God and the coming judgment on a sinful generation. He called people back to a radical obedience to the Torah, the Hebrew Bible, and threatened the fiery anger of God on those who didn't repent and obey. He baptised those who responded to his message as a final sign of the conversion of all Israel, of the beginning of the reign of God. Jesus recognises and affirms John's message. His own message is somewhat different as we shall see shortly but he identifies himself with John's message by coming to him for baptism along with all the rest.

Now you might not be comfortable with using the words conversion or repentance for what happened to Jesus at that time, but whatever you want to

call it there is a big change in his life from this time on. For the last eighteen years Jesus had done nothing to hit the headlines. To the best of our knowledge, he'd done his apprenticeship and worked in the family carpentry business for pretty much all of that time. There are no reports of crowds flocking to the chippy's shop to sit on the saw dust and hang on every word that proceeded from the mouth of the chippy. So far as we know he made no waves and drew no attention to himself. But immediately following his baptism the devil personally makes a last ditch effort to throw him off course. Within a chapter or so he's got people quitting their jobs to follow him, people bringing the sick from all over the country to be healed by him, and crowds gathering on a mountainside to listen to his message. It's not much longer and he's got the religious authorities up in arms accusing him of blasphemy, and then plotting to kill him, and as you know, within three years of his baptism there's been a conspiracy to have him tried on false charges and he's tortured and executed. All quite a dramatic impact for a gentle chippy from Nazareth. Something changed pretty dramatically with that baptism and Matthew records it so that we can not only understand but do likewise. Matthew is calling for the church to undergo the same sort of dramatic transformation so that we too can make an impact on our society.

So what happened to Jesus at his baptism. Matthew tells us that when Jesus had been baptised, 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, in whom I delight."

Others may have experienced the forgiveness of sins for conversion at this moment, but what Jesus experienced was the experience of the Spirit of God. He saw the Spirit of God descending and alighting on him. This is the same Spirit of God who we met in the first sentence of Genesis, brooding over the formless earth, like a mother bird over her egg, cherishing it and willing it to life. This is the Spirit who broods over each one of us, cherishing us and willing us to fullness of life. This is the Spirit who is the active creative power of God in the world, who calls and guides and loves us into the paths of God, who calls us to live life and to create life and to redeem life and to enhance life and to protect life.

It was this Spirit who came down and alighted on Jesus as he emerged from the water and claimed him as the son of God who brings delight to the Lord. The description recalls the passage that was read to us from Isaiah: Here is my

servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people upon it and spirit to those who walk in it: I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Those words of course were not spoken of Jesus when Isaiah wrote them, they referred to the community of God's people. This is what God's servant is to be. Of course as a description of the servant of the Lord they fit beautifully for Jesus. He is the chosen one who delights the Lord, who the Spirit is given to to bring forth justice and healing and freedom. It was in this moment of baptism that Jesus was anointed as the Son of God, the chosen Servant of the Lord and commissioned to confront the demons of his society and to bring healing to the brokenness of his people and to call women and men into the intimate relationship with God that enabled him to address God as Abba, Daddy.

And from that moment forward that was the mission he embarked on. Unlike John, Jesus does not proclaim the coming of the angry judge of the world, but the intimate nearness of God, Abba God. Unlike John he does not demonstrate the arriving kingdom through threats of judgment and an ascetic lifestyle, but through signs of grace and acts of mercy to desperate people and through miracles of health and healing for those who have been sick and suffering. He preached not of the last terrifying days, but of the fullness of time, the dawning of the jubilee, the day of liberation, peace and hope.

The fruits of Jesus' experience of the Spirit can be seen in every following story of the gospel. He was a changed man from this moment on, a man on a mission, a man bent on bringing that message of an intimate, merciful, healing, liberating God to men and women in need, even if it cost him his life. The reading from Isaiah serves us as a beautiful summary of his approach to that mission. But it can do more than that for us too. Remember that it was written to describe the mission of the people of God, not of Jesus. It was written as a description of our mission. When Isaiah wrote "I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness," it was you plural; you Israel, you who bear the name of the Lord. And so as we read it now, we can legitimately read it as You South Yarra

Community Baps. You are given as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners who sit in darkness. You are my servant whom I uphold, my chosen in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon you and you will bring forth justice to the nations.

It's scary, isn't it. But the same Spirit that descended and alighted on Jesus at his baptism is given to us . . . and for the same reason. It is time to put the mission of the people of God before everything else in our lives. It's time to turn the world upside down. Jesus was given the Spirit for the sick whom he healed. We are given the Spirit for the sick and broken who desperately need healing in our world. Jesus was given the Spirit for the sinners whose sins he forgave. We are given the Spirit for the sinners around us who are in desperate need of forgiveness and mercy. Jesus was given the Spirit for the poor and the outcast whose fellowship he sought out. We are given the Spirit for the poor and outcast whose fellowship is shunned by most of our society. Jesus was given the Spirit for the men and women who he called to follow him in discipleship. We are given the Spirit as those men and women whom he has called so that we might follow in his footsteps and carry on his mission. And a voice is heard from heaven, "You South Yarra Community Baps are my beloved child, in whom I delight. Go, do as my beloved son has done."