

Baptism of Jesus; 13 January 2008

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Why was Jesus baptised? He was the messiah and in any case he was a Jew, one of God's chosen people. Why be baptised for forgiveness of sins? This was an embarrassment to the early church and yet it was felt necessary to tell all that Jesus had been baptised.

After Jesus' resurrection, his disciples were fired with a calling to spread the message that Jesus had brought from God. As the years passed, the stories about his ministry were told and retold.

Gradually the church began to develop, not only in Israel but throughout the Roman empire and some congregations had different needs to others and some interpreted the message in different ways to others. We can see from the letters written by the apostle Paul to a number of the early church communities that some had not properly understood the message.

Finally, starting about forty years after the crucifixion, a number of people found it necessary to set down in writing what they understood were the most important features of the life and work of Jesus and of the infant church. This morning we've heard from the gospel of Matthew and from the Acts of the Apostles which was written by the same Luke as wrote the Gospel of Luke. In particular, we've heard how Jesus was baptised and how God proclaimed him as his son. This was the start of his ministry.

Matthew sets the scene well. Initially he tells his readers how Jesus was a descendant from Abraham and David. All the signs were right for him to be the long awaited Messiah who would save his people from oppression. Wise men from other countries came to worship him. Then there was the flight to Egypt and return recalling Moses.

About thirty years later, John the Baptist was preaching and had a considerable following of people. Of course, John was not one of the official leaders of the temple. Nor was he wealthy – he dressed in the simplest clothes possible and ate frugally. Some people thought that he was a great person but he told them that there was one even greater than he and this person would baptise people not with water but with the Holy Spirit. Matthew clearly expects us to understand that John saw Jesus as that person. John was baptising in the river, people who had repented of their sins and wanted to become good Jews. It was normal in those days for converts to Judaism to be baptised and that was what John was doing. What was not normal was for Jews to be baptised as they were considered to be already part of God's people.

Then Jesus walked up and asked to be baptised! John argued with him, initially saying that he was not worthy to baptise Jesus but Jesus insisted.

After John's baptism of him, God took over and sent his Spirit to Jesus and God spoke to make it clear that Jesus was God's son and was entrusted with taking God's message to the people. As the son of God, Jesus would be cared for by God but in return had an obligation to be obedient and faithful. The words put into God's mouth are from two passages in the Old Testament which would have been very familiar to those hearing them. "This is my beloved son" is a quote from Psalm 2:7 – generally accepted as a description of the messiah. "With whom I am well pleased" is a quote from Isaiah 42:1 which is a description of the suffering servant. The suffering servant in the old Testament is a mysterious figure, who though innocent, suffers for his people. There are four songs about the suffering servant in Isaiah.

Jesus would be a man of peace not war. Remember that the Holy Spirit came onto him like a dove –

the dove that was always a symbol of peace. We have to remember that Jesus came to fulfil God's plan, not ours. We need also to understand that the descent of the spirit as dove is an anointing of Jesus as Messiah. From it he received the power, wisdom and holiness for the role.

The baptism of Jesus cannot be seen as just a nice family event or a normal rite of passage. Jesus really made a big statement when he insisted on being baptised. He was identifying with the people and God praised him for it. In fact God immediately claimed him as his beloved son in whom he was pleased. God wanted to demonstrate that he was God for everyone.

Jesus was not the great and powerful Messiah that had been expected. Perhaps the people had forgotten what Isaiah had said. The second writer of Isaiah had written of Israel as a servant of God which would bring forth justice and do so to all people on earth. Jesus came without fanfare. He identified with those people who sought baptism as a sign of repentance. He identified with the poor rather than the mighty in the land. Jesus was the messiah but he was messiah in a different way and his way was that of the suffering servant. He would humbly identify with God's people, he would take their place and share their lives and finally die their death.

As the young church developed, many issues had to be agreed on. A major one was that Jesus' message was for gentiles as well as Jews. And over all they had to make it clear that God was a God of love.

As we heard in the reading from Acts, Peter had spoken to the Roman centurion, Cornelius, setting out the essence of Jesus' role. Jesus was sent by God and equipped by God with the spirit and with power. And it was God's love that did this. God was not angry and God had no favourites. Peter spelt out how Jesus healed the sick, how he was crucified and rose again, showing that God's power was not to be defeated. As a result all of us can enter into a new relationship with God.

It was Jesus' obedience to God and doing what God wanted, which made him righteous. It was not being right in people's eyes or his own that mattered. As Christians, we too are baptised as a sign that we have entered into a new relationship with God. And that means that we too have a commitment to be obedient to God. Part of that obedience means being in a right relationship with God's people.

Recently I caught up with the film My Big Fat Greek Wedding. The film came out a few years ago but I'm glad that I got the DVD, especially as it also had a couple of interviews with the author. The film is a girl meets boy story with the twist of being cross cultural and based to a large extent on the real life story of the writer's own marriage. The writer starred in the lead role as the 30 year old Greek girl, Toula.

Ian, the man she wants to marry, is Anglo-Saxon and her family will not accept him unless he becomes Greek and they are married in a Greek orthodox church. He takes it seriously. He was not brought up in any particular religion so he becomes a Greek orthodox member by being baptised. Evidently the writer's real life husband was also baptised in order that their wedding could be held in an orthodox church and he could be fully part of the family. Ian's commitment lasted as the viewer sees at the end of the film when he is shown bringing his daughter up in the Greek culture.

We protestants in Australia today may not have the same very large extended families but when we are baptised and become members of the church we also become members of the church family. And to that church family we have responsibilities just as we do to our biological families. We have commitments to live the life that God wants us all to live. We learn to nurture and guide and care for each other. We are not alone in the world because we have other brothers and sisters in Christ.

Another lesson to learn from the readings today is that God does communicate with us if we are listening. We might think that God speaking to Jesus was special and not meant to be to any one else. But, according to Matthew, others around did hear and the moment was a profound one for Jesus and for the early church.

Later, as we heard, God spoke to others including Cornelius and Peter with the result that amazing changes took place. Peter learnt that he should take the gospel to gentiles and should regard them as being the same as himself. Cornelius learnt what Jesus had done during his ministry and committed himself to following Jesus. In fact Cornelius went further than that and invited many family, servants and friends to hear Peter speak so that not just Cornelius was converted. All that could easily not have happened if Cornelius had decided not to act on God's call to him or if Peter had dismissed the vision from God as just a bad dream. After all, a dream of various live wild animals being lowered in a sheet as dinner could well be a bit of a nightmare.

Listening to God takes commitment. We have to be attuned to the right wave length to pick up what God says. We have to allow time and we have to be ready to do what is asked of us. That is all part of the level of commitment to God made by Christians.

John the Baptist was surprised by Jesus. To that point in time, John had had the same idea of what a messiah would be as did other Jews. John and they had to listen to God and realise that God's plans were not always the same as they thought they were. God's plans were not always as people wanted them to be.

Bishop Tom Wright has said very well what we can expect if we follow Jesus:
"Those who in repentance and faith follow Jesus through baptism and along the road he will now lead us will find, if we listen, that the same voice from heaven speaks to us as well. As we learn to put aside our own plans and submit to his, we may be granted moments of vision, glimpses of his greater reality. And at the centre of that sudden sight we will find our loving father, affirming us as his children, equipping us, too, with his spirit so that our lives may be swept clean and made ready for use". Amen

Mrs Elizabeth Richardson