

Sermon – Epiphany 1A / The Baptism of the Lord

The Text: Matthew 3:13-17, Jesus' baptism and ours

What's the connection between Jesus' baptism and our baptism?

Today we'll be simply asking - how are these connected?

What we'll find is that they are connected, and that the link between them is the cross. We'll see that Jesus is baptised to be joined with us and so take on our sins, so that as we are baptised we are joined to him and take on his righteousness and purity.

The text begins with Jesus travelling from Galilee to where John was at the Jordan River. Which means he travelled about 20-25 km or so to basically the middle of nowhere. There were no cars or trains, so this is no short stroll. Whatever is about to happen here, Jesus thinks this is important enough to make some effort to get out there.

And of course, John's first reaction is, you've got to be kidding me! Jesus why are you coming to be baptised by me?

I'll give you an analogy to think about this.

Imagine you agreed at the next election to hand out how-to-vote cards for your political party of choice at your local polling booth.

You're no expert in politics, but when people ask you basic questions about your party's policies you can give them the basic gist and encourage them to vote for your party. Then something very strange happens. The leader of your party, who is also the prime minister arrives! They come right up to you, and say, *'I'm trying to work out who to vote for. I'm wondering if you could explain your party's policy on health and our hospital system.'*

How would you react? Obviously you would say something like, 'Why are you asking me? I shouldn't be explaining that to you, you should be explaining it to me?' Well that's sort of how John felt that day, and rightly so!

What was John's baptism all about? It was a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. So it was a baptism for sinners, for those who acknowledged that there were things wrong in their life and who wanted to confess those things, to turn away from them, to make a fresh start and so prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah.

So by definition, only someone who has no sin doesn't qualify for a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And there is only one person in that category- Jesus, the pure and sinless son of God. So when Jesus shows up wanting to be baptised, John rightly protests.

Jesus however says:

'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting to fulfil all righteousness'.

So what does this mean?

This seems to be the hinge.

Righteousness basically means to do the will of God. To do the will of God.

God wills for the world to be a certain way, and for his people to live in the world a certain way. And of course, we all know that we don't fulfil this, do we?

From a very early age we show our rebellious nature. You never have to teach your kids to do wrong things, that comes quite naturally: good things, those you have to teach.

All of us fail when it comes to this righteousness, this doing the will of God. Negatively we break God's law, and positively we fail to fulfil God's law.

So for this righteousness to be achieved, two things need to happen: the sins against God need to be somehow dealt with, and on the positive side the righteousness God requires needs to be done. And Jesus says that he needs to be baptised to fulfil all righteousness.

He's saying that somehow in Jesus these righteous requirements will be fulfilled, and not just for Jesus, but for all people. This fulfils all righteousness.

It's very interesting that later on, Jesus is talking about his suffering and death with James and John and he refers to this as a baptism. So he seems to connect his baptism in the Jordan with his death on the cross. And the two are connected.

You see Jesus' baptism is the beginning of his life of perfectly carrying out the will of God, and at the same time taking on himself the sins of everyone else, and then offering his perfect obedience to the Father on the cross, so that the righteous requirements of God are fulfilled.

And God affirms this in a very dramatic way;

- by opening the heavens,
- by sending the Holy Spirit to rest on Jesus, and
- by affirming who Jesus is and what he is doing by saying 'This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased'.

In Jesus' baptism we see the beginning of what Luther loved to call the 'great exchange,' or the 'sweet swap'. In Jesus' baptism he identifies with us, He who knew no sin joins himself with us sinners. He takes our place.

Perhaps you can imagine it like this. Imagine a whole mob of sheep covered in all sorts of filth, and one beautiful clean and pure white sheep behind them. They're all next to a river.

First all the dirty sheep go down into a river, and all the muck and grime wash off and settles in the water so that the sheep come out the other side clean. But then one beautiful white clean sheep goes into the water, and takes on all that dirt, all that grime, all that filth. He takes it on himself. That's a picture of what Jesus begins here in his baptism. He is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

So Jesus' baptism is connected to his death on the cross, and his resurrection from the dead. But how then does that connect with our baptism?

If in Jesus' baptism he joins himself with us, takes on all that is bad in us and takes it to the cross, then in our baptism we are joined with him and take on all that is good and pure from him.

Another way to picture it could be by thinking about a negative in photography. Some of us here may be old enough to remember negatives with photographs before digital came along. Young people you might have to ask your parents about negatives. Now I'm no expert photographer but basically my understanding is that in negatives compared with the real photograph, the dark parts are light and the light parts of dark.

So it's the reverse of the real photo.

Well that's a way of thinking about Jesus' baptism and ours.

In his baptism in the Jordan and in his baptism on the cross Jesus takes away our darkness, even becomes our darkness, so that in our baptism we shine with his light.

Friends do you see what this means? That in baptism you are baptised into Christ Jesus, that your baptism is directly connected with his by a line that goes through the cross and the empty tomb. This means that all that happens to Jesus at his baptism we can say also is given to you because you are joined to Jesus. So at Jesus' baptism the heavens were torn open, and in your baptism, heaven is opened wide.

At Jesus' baptism the Spirit descended like a dove, and because you are united with Christ in your baptism, the Spirit has been poured out on you. You have the gift of God's Holy Spirit living in you.

At Jesus' baptism the voice of the Father said,
'This is my Son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased',
And you as a baptised Child of God have the same promise,
God loves you, he is well pleased with you, because he sees you wrapped up in the life of his beloved Son Jesus.

We all know what a powerful thing it is to know the love of a parent and the knowledge that they are pleased with you. Some of you know this in a positive sense, some sadly know how damaging it is to lack this.

What you have been promised in your baptism is that the Almighty God of the universe, who is also your Father, is pleased with you, because you share in the Sonship of Jesus.

So then, we may be tempted to think that is the end: that once baptism is done it doesn't have any ongoing relevance in our life. But of course, just as Jesus' baptism was only the beginning of his journey, so our baptism is only the beginning.

Paul makes that connection in Romans 6,
'Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life'.

Did you hear that? All this happens, so that we can **walk** with God in this new life we've been given. You see baptism is not just a once off event.

May we live out our baptism continually throughout our life as we die to our sins, and rise to new life every day. Amen.