

First Sunday after Epiphany
12 January 2020
The baptism of our Lord
Matthew 3:13-17; John 1, 29-34

Then Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan to John, in order to be baptised by him. But John tried to prevent him, saying, 'I need to be baptised by you, and are you coming to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Allow it at this time, for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he allows him. And after he had been baptised, Jesus immediately went up from the water, and, look, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him. And look, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'.

On Christmas Day we heard how the angel told Joseph to call Mary's son 'Jesus [Saviour], for he will save his people from their sins' (Matt 1:21). Then on New Year's Day we heard how his parents gave him this name 'Jesus' when they had him circumcised on the 8th day (Luke 2:21). And this morning we hear how Jesus was baptised when he was about 30 years old – baptised in the river Jordan as he began his mission to cleanse us from our sins.

These days many people don't want to hear that they are sinners and need their sins washed away. They deny that we were all conceived and born in sin. I love what the British Catholic writer, G K Chesterton, has to say about this. Chesterton was the original author of the Father Brown detective stories that the present ABC-TV series is loosely based on. With regard to the idea that we were born totally good and holy, he says something like, such inherited holiness is something we can hardly imagine even in our dreams. But original sin, inherited sin, is something we can see in the street! You can see it in a toddler throwing a tantrum. The last time Christine and I witnessed that was last week in the main street in Kingston in the South East: a two-year-old girl standing outside the store refusing to follow her very patient father. You can see inherited sin in a rebellious teenager. Or you can see it any grumpy old man or grumpy old woman. We would add to what Chesterton says that our innate selfishness and sinfulness is so ingrained that we can't see it for ourselves in all its depth; we need to hear and believe God's testimony in his holy Word. There we see how each of us has fallen short of the glory of God, each of us fails to love our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and fails to love our neighbour as ourselves. And the first characteristic of love is patience. I have a cup that testifies to my own failings in this regard (Christine thinks it's pretty good: "Patience is what you have when there are too many witnesses.")

As I've said and as any experienced parent or teacher knows, from an early age, children can be naughty and disobedient. One of the first words they learn is 'No'; it just comes naturally. It's not always easy for parents to exercise their God-given authority and responsibility. It's not always easy for teachers, either, especially these days. I remember Professor Frederick at Melbourne University, a good Methodist, telling us teacher trainees back in the 1960s: 'You'll need a lot of will-power to overcome the students' won't-power'.

John the Baptist was acutely aware of his own sins and shortcomings. When Jesus came to the Jordan and asked John to baptise him, John said: 'I need to be baptised by you, and are you coming to me?' John thinks Jesus should stay up there on the bank of the Jordan, and sing out to everyone: "Come on, all you sinners, you repent of your sins and get down in the water with John and get yourself washed."

But Jesus answers John: "Let it be so now, for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness". "God's righteousness" is his saving deeds, all he does to fulfill his promise to do everything necessary to save his people. So Jesus, the innocent Son

of God, identifies with sinners, he stands down there in the Jordan with them, he receives from John the baptism that sinners receive. So John and Jesus cooperate in order to fulfil all righteousness, in other words, to bring salvation from sin. In this text, righteousness means 'salvation', just as it does in Psalm 71: 'My mouth will tell of your righteousness, of your salvation all the day'. [*Luther's evangelical breakthrough came after years of beating up on himself, fasting to the point where it ruined his health, breast-beating over his sins and confessing them over and over to the point where his confessor, Father John Staupitz, got tired of it. Luther was wrestling with the theme of God's righteousness, thinking that because he was a righteous God he had to punish us unrighteous, sinful people. Finally, while he was teaching Paul's letter to the Romans and the Psalms (31 & 71), it dawned on him that God's righteousness isn't a harsh, condemning, judging righteousness but a saving, forgiving righteousness. He wrote, 'Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise through open gates.' As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5, 'He who knew no sin became a sinner for us.' Jesus took on himself the sins which he had not committed, wiping them out and drowning them in his holy baptism. And, three years later, He consummated the divine plan of salvation by identifying with sinners in his saving death on the cross.

See 1 Peter 2:21-25, based on Isaiah 53: "Christ committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls."

After his baptism Jesus went up from the water, and look, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him. And look, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'

And that's what happens to you and me and everyone who's baptised into Christ, though in our case it doesn't happen so visibly and audibly as it did at Jesus' baptism. But for you and me, too, we believe that in our christening, God's Holy Spirit comes to rest on us like a dove coming to rest on our shoulder. And the Father's voice from heaven is saying to you and me and all his baptised children: 'You are my beloved son. You are my beloved daughter. In you I am well pleased. All your sins are washed away. I have called you by name. You are mine'.

Yes, we can joyfully affirm what the angel said to Joseph, "You will call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." Thanks be to God. Amen.