

Baptism of Jesus

Matthew 3.13-17

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The story of the baptism of Jesus is part of the epiphany season; because of his baptism, Jesus' true identity became visible.

Who is Jesus? That question is impossible to answer without also talking about our own identity. Who are we?

How do you look at yourself?

1. Jesus realised that his time had come.

After Jesus was baptised, Luke in his Gospel writes emphatically that when Jesus began his ministry, he was about 30 years of age. That was the age in which priests were allowed to begin their ministry in the Temple of Israel.

So Luke links the beginning of the ministry of Jesus with his baptism. And Matthew does the same, though in a more implicit manner.

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan, to John”. Coming from Galilee to the Jordan meant, leaving the province and going to Judea, the land of the Temple and the religious leaders of Israel.

This is the beginning of revealing his true self, the beginning of the confrontation

For thirty years Jesus had waited in Nazareth, faithfully performing the simple duties of the home and of the carpenter's shop. All the time he knew that a world was waiting for him. All the time he grew increasingly conscious of his mission.

The success of any undertaking is determined by the wisdom with which the moment is chosen to embark upon it. Jesus must have waited for the hour to strike. When John emerged Jesus knew that the time had arrived.

Why should that be so?

Never in all history before this had any Jew submitted to being baptised. The Jews knew and used baptism, but only for proselytes who came into Judaism from some other pagan faith.



It was natural that the sin-stained, polluted proselyte should be baptised, but no Jew had ever conceived that he, a member of the chosen people, a son of Abraham, assured of God's salvation, could ever need baptism.

Baptism was for sinners, and no Jew ever conceived of himself as a sinner shut out from God.

Now for the first time in their national history the Jews realised their own sin and their own need of forgiveness from God. Never before had there been such a unique national movement of penitence and of search for God.

This was the opportunity for Jesus, and in his baptism he identified himself with the men he came to save, in the hour of their new consciousness of their sinfulness, and of their separation from God.

I think this sense of that being the very moment for Jesus to begin his ministry is also underlined by Matthew when he says that Jesus, after his baptism, immediately went up from the water.

That anyone after baptism gets out of the water is rather obvious, so the only reason for Matthew to use that word 'immediately' was, to stress that Jesus now had a mission. His work had begun.

So to come to be baptised was momentous: The course of Jesus's life began with being buried in water; it ended with Jesus being buried in a cave.

I have regularly been training people in time management, and life-management skills. Some people are born procrastinators. They have to do a big job, and they never dare to start.

One lesson I have always told such people, is that the only thing you have to do, is one very tiny first step that is seen by others. So that people realise you have begun a task. As soon as you have set that first small step, usually the next step, and the next step, follow more or less automatically.

For Jesus to be baptised in itself was a relatively small step. But from that moment on, he was pushed forth on his path of redeeming the world, and that would be a costly road.

2. Why was he baptised?

From the earliest times people were puzzled by the fact that Jesus submitted to be baptised.

If Jesus is who we believe him to be, he did not stand in need of repentance, he did not need forgiveness from God. John's baptism was for sinners conscious of their sins, and therefore it does not seem applicable to Jesus at all.

Jesus imposes his authority with his demand for immediate baptism, “Let it be so now”. So John obeyed. Jesus made clear who was in command — right in front of the masses of people of whom many were thinking that John was the Messiah.

Thus Jesus began his ministry. You think John is big, that he is the Messiah? I am the one.

And Jesus explained why he wanted to be baptised. “For thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.” Yes, true. But we have puzzled over the meaning of those words.

For Jewish people, righteousness was linked with a pure keeping of the laws of God.

Theophylact of Ochrid, a Byzantine archbishop and commentator on the Bible in the 11th century, says this:

"Righteousness" means the law. Human nature was accursed, Jesus says, because it was not able to fulfil the law. Therefore I have fulfilled all the other requirements of the law. One thing remains for Me to do, that I be baptised. When I have fulfilled this, I shall have delivered human nature from the curse.

Jesus Christ had lived a perfect life; he had faithfully obeyed God. He had walked on the path of the laws of Israel, the laws of God. And he had done this as the first person after Adam ever.

Ever since Adam and Eve decided to disobey God, all of us, human beings, lived with our whole world at a giant distance from God. Angels guarded the tree to paradise; mankind could not be close to God.

But Jesus, by being a complete man, a new Adam, inaugurated a new humanity. He who was without sin, embraced the world in his baptism. He identified with sinners by being baptised.

And this baptism would be completed on the cross. Jesus even called his crucifixion a baptism. He asked his disciples, “Can you ... be baptised with the baptism with which I shall be baptised?”

By being baptised, Jesus accepted his own martyrdom that would be for our sake.

When the apostle Paul speaks about our baptism, he calls it a baptism into the death of Jesus.

By being baptised we follow Jesus into the water — as he identifies we us, so we identify with him. We are baptised with him in his death.



This is also how we celebrate Holy Eucharist. Jesus died for us, but we also die with him in eucharist. That is why in many eucharistic celebrations, we use Romans 12:1,

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

We will never, in this life, be perfect people. We know ourselves. But by connecting with the perfect life and death of Jesus, in baptism and eucharist, in faith and with thanksgiving, we are taken up by Jesus to God, his Father and our Father.

So here is Jesus, in front of John the Baptist, and he says: “Do it now.” Jesus was ready to walk the narrow path for us. With us.

3. Revelation of his glory

Jesus took the first step, and immediately God his Father confirmed that he was on the right track.

The heavens were opened to Jesus.

St John Chrysostom, a Church Father of the 4th century, writes:

Since Adam’s sin no soul had mounted the skies, but the heavens were continually closed. When, lo! on Christ's baptism they were again opened.

And he adds:

The heavens are opened to the baptised, and they see those things which are in heaven, not by seeing them with the bodily eye, but by believing with the spiritual eye of faith.



What happened to Jesus at this event, happens to us, followers of Jesus. Heaven is open for us

And then a dove descends on Jesus, to rest on him. The Spirit has come to God’s perfect temple, to Jesus Christ.

Not that the Holy Spirit did not reside in Jesus from his birth; He is the Son of God. But to symbolise the empowerment of the Holy Spirit for his ministry, the dove rested on Jesus.

Jesus took the first step in his public ministry, and God affirms this publicly. Just as when you set your first small steps to serve God, you can be assured that God affirms you. He empowers you.

We have the awesome privilege that the Spirit of God rests on us. If we share in the life of God with us, Jesus, the Father gives us God in us, the Holy Spirit.

And to add to the epiphany, the revelation that Jesus is truly God's chosen vessel, a voice sounds from heaven. It is good that the dove had settled on Jesus, so that when the voice sounded, all bystanders understood that the voice spoke of Jesus, not of John.

This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

Jesus knew this already; I do not think the voice sounded for the sake of Jesus. It was for us, to realise that the God in heaven is the Father of Jesus Christ. At this beginning of Jesus' ministry, the whole Trinity holds a brief mini-conference.

By the way, "This is my beloved Son," is a quotation from Psalm 2. Every Jew accepted that Psalm as a description of the Messiah, the mighty King of God who was to come.

"With whom I am well pleased" is a quotation from Isaiah 42, which is a description of the Suffering Servant, a description which culminates in Isaiah 53 where that servant is killed for the sins of the people.

So at the baptism of Jesus we have a very short summary of the whole Gospel.

Conclusion

And as we are united with Jesus in his baptism, as Jesus opened the heavens for us, as we have received the Holy Spirit of God, so God also says to you:

You are my beloved son, or daughter. In you I am well pleased.

Your baptism connects you with Jesus. All that he has, is yours.

That is why we have such great confidence in prayer; God is our Father.

When your Father looks at you, He sees that funny imperfect person that you are; nothing is hidden from his eyes.

But at the same moment the Son of God steps forward, He stands before you, and He says to His Father: 'Father, I know he is funny and very imperfect, but I was baptised in the waters of death for him. He died with me and he rose with me.'

So the Father of Jesus Christ then says to you: "Ah! You are also my child. For me you are perfect."

+ Amen

