

**SERMON: GEOFF CHADWICK: ORDINARY SUNDAY 1c : THE BAPTISM
OF OUR LORD: LK 3:15-22:**

“PUBLIC MINISTRY”

The baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of his public ministry. Since Christmas we have heard the stories of his birth, the blessings of Simeon and Anna over the infant Jesus at the temple, and the visit of the Magi from the East. These events are little “snap shots” from the infant life of Jesus. Today we begin to follow the “newsreel of his life”. Jesus’ Infant life has been rather private but now we begin to hear the great stories of his public life. This public life begins at his baptism.

Jesus strides out into the wilderness to be baptised by John and the purpose for his being begins. Jesus’ baptism is not a private little ceremony held in a quiet chapel somewhere surrounded by a few close relatives. By contrast, Jesus’ baptism is in the open, in the wilderness. Not only that, the officiant, is John the Baptist- a well-known outspoken public figure. Jesus’ baptism also takes place in the midst of relationships – not just those with John the Baptist and the crowds – but one that hints at the later idea of the Trinity. Jesus, comes out of the waters of baptism to be greeted with the words: “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Lk3:2, NRSV), and God’s Spirit descends on him like a dove.

Jesus is baptised in the midst of public relationships.

And so with us, who have been baptised, regardless of whether that happened in a private little chapel somewhere or in the midst of a crowded public arena, are reminded that baptism calls us into the public arena. In baptism we get caught up in the interactions of those around us and in the interactions of the Trinity.

The “public face” of baptism was almost lost to us a few years ago when baptisms happened on a Sunday afternoon as a private little ceremony. Although

intimate, this practice, I think, helped to foster the idea that religion is a private matter. So in the workplace or in the street or even in public debate, religious matters have been left in the “quiet chapels” of our private lives. This may also be a cultural thing in Australia. Those who have visited the USA tell me that God and religion is a topic never far from diners and public conversation. Nevertheless, we in Australia often leave God conversations out of our public speech.

I wonder too if we also have a tendency to privatise our God actions. Alan Klaas in his book In Search of the Unchurched, notes a trend in many declining churches:

“Another method of understanding a congregation's definition of ministry is to examine its "entry points." Analyze the monthly calendar or weekly list of activities. Classify events into three groups. Group 1 are events and activities for members. These include clubs, organizations, teams, and study groups. Group 2 events support the congregation's structure. These include boards, committees, choirs, and service groups. Group 3 events are attended by large numbers of people who are not already members.

In most congregations, you will find that most activities fall into the first two groups. These congregations have busy members. They have involved members; much is happening for them. Very little is happening for people who are not already members” (Klaas, A.C., 1996, In Search of the Unchurched, Alban Institute, New York).

It would be an interesting exercise for us to examine our own activities in our a parishes to see how we fare in each of these Groups. An over abundance of Group 1 and 2 activities is what I mean by a tendency to privatise our God actions. We can be very

busy doing all sorts of “churchy” things for God but if they have no impact or don’t involve the unchurched then we have lost the public nature of our baptism. A lot can happen in our quiet little chapel, but if “the crowds” (Lk 3.7, NRSV) are unaware of it, or not invited to be a part of it, then we have neglected many of the public relationships of our baptism.

As I said at the beginning of this sermon, the baptism of Jesus marks the beginning of his public ministry. It is the same with us. Our baptism, whenever and however that was marks the beginning of our *public* ministry. As a group of baptised individuals who happen to be put together as the people of a Parish, we are called to allow the baptismal spirit of God to mould us into a dynamic body of public relationships. We gather to be challenged by each other, to confess to one another, to forgive one another, to seek living water with fellow seekers, and to hear God’s blessing as we learn to find our pleasure in each other. We gather, not as individuals in a quiet little chapel wanting to exercise our own private devotions, but as a community within a powerhouse of God’s activity where our own baptism draws us out of the water into a Trinity and community of living dynamic relationships.

At the start of a new year, and at a time when Parishes will be making their plans for this year, we are reminded not to simply involve ourselves in busy churchy activities but to make God known to the people around our little area around the Jordan.

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.**