

Baptism of our Lord (Epiphany 1) Mark 1:4-11

Today we fix our focus on Baptism, the baptism of Jesus and as an extension our own baptism and we have just heard one of the 4 accounts of Jesus baptism, this being one of those things testified to by all 4 gospel writers with no hint of contradiction – it's a shame the same can't be said of all scripture!

It is very easy to identify our own Baptism and indeed the practise of baptism in our faith with Jesus' experience of baptism but our baptism is a response to his and in his time being baptised was most unusual. It is almost automatic for us to want to baptise our children but what are we as parents are hoping to achieve by it. Is it just a superstitious action to make sure our children are on God's radar or it is gaining for them membership of the Church like it is some sort of club with its initiation rites like any other.

For some people this is part of it, it is also about special events marking special points in our lives and baptism of an infant does just that – it claims the child early in their lives for Christ. Baptism as an adult coming to faith is equally marking a stage of life – it marks the stage when a person moved from darkness to light, from ignorance to belief.

It was no different for Jesus in that his baptism marked a stage in his life. It was now time for Jesus to begin His public ministry so he goes to John to be baptised. It is only a short passage of scripture but these words contain a great deal of importance for studying the life of Christ. Everything we read in the gospels is there for a reason, to explain and illuminate something nothing is noted by chance, and certainly nothing this consistent, so why is this so important?

First, Jesus went out of His way to be baptized we are told that "Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John". Jesus was about 30 years old, understood to be the age at which public office could be held by Jews. John was about 6 months older and had been baptising for about 6 months. Jesus had spent 18 years working and serving at home and suddenly, he makes quite a journey from Galilee to the Jordan River. As the crow flies, that could have meant anywhere from a 30-60 mile journey most people walked everywhere they went so it is safe to assume that Jesus walked there.

Also, Jesus did not come from a culture where baptism was the norm, Jews simply didn't get baptised. The Jews used baptism, but only for proselytes who came into Judaism from some other faith. Since Jesus went out of His way to be baptised there must have been reasons that he did that. Jesus had a purpose in going to John. He was identifying himself with John and his message. John was preaching a message of repentance and a message about the coming Messiah and Jesus was the fulfilment of that message.

If there were any questions before the baptism, as to whether this was appropriate or not, those questions were completely wiped away by what happened next. "He went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." For the first time in the Bible, we have a complete and clear indication of the Trinity. As Jesus was coming out of the water, the Holy Spirit was coming down upon him, and at the same time a voice from heaven says, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." All three persons of the Trinity were there together and offered a glimpse of the perfect whole. The Holy Spirit came and gave Jesus the power and strength to begin His earthly ministry. And God gave public approval and endorsement of Jesus as His Son.

The voice which Jesus heard at the baptism is very important. "This is my Son, whom I love"

is a quotation from Psalm 2:7. Jews accepted Psalm 2 as a description of the Messiah. The Voice also said, "With Him I am well pleased." This is a quotation from Isaiah 42:1, "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations"

It is clear that Jesus baptism was a complicated affair. What seemed in the beginning to be one man responding to the preaching of his cousin became the event which identified Jesus as the messiah and heralded the start of his public ministry. Through baptism he identified himself with the people He came to save and after his baptism things really began to happen. If some of those who heard John and who were baptised in the Jordan thought that they had by that action done enough to secure their relationship with God, Jesus' example would have proved that was not the case. He began his public ministry, he ministered, he helped, he loved, he served and Jesus serves as our example.

Therefore, we need to think very carefully about our own baptism. We may have invited Jesus into our lives and been baptised by following the example of Jesus but that doesn't mean our work is done. This is not an initiation rite which offers a ticket to eternal life. Just as Jesus came to tell the Jewish people that their family connections were not in themselves enough for God, that he could make children of Abraham from rocks on the ground, so we should be on our guard about seeing baptism as something that protects us. In fact what baptism entitles us to do is to recognise the work we have to do in response to God's grace and his love for us.

We need to exercise our public ministry, we need to help, and love, and serve just like Jesus did. We have no excuse of ignorance – by our baptism we are members of Christ and inheritors of his kingdom but we also have to work to get that kingdom established. But like Jesus we won't have to do it alone, under our own strength because the Holy Spirit will give us strength and power for our ministry just like He did for Jesus.

And if we remain faithful then we will hear those words from our Heavenly Father, the words which make it all worthwhile, just like Jesus did "You are my child, well done my good and faithful servant I am very pleased with you."