

Baptism of Christ 2008

Mark 1.4-11

Introduction

We are emerging from the first part of the Christmas season; we have left behind the nativity stories; Mary and Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds, wise men, and the rest. But you may not realise that the Christmas season actually carries on until Candlemas Sunday on the 1st February. Only then, with words spoken by Simeon and Anna in the Jerusalem temple, do we leave the Christmas behind and turn instead towards Lent, and the Cross of Calvary.

But today, we leap thirty years ahead in the story of Jesus and come to the account of Jesus' baptism in the river Jordan. We have just heard the account of that event in Mark's gospel. Luke and Matthew also record the event; and John's gospel refers indirectly to it. Each gospel writer gives slightly different versions of what happened; and that tells us that each gospel writer is also interpreting it from the standpoint of a particular church's tradition some decades later. Let's tease out some points from the story of Jesus' baptism. If you want to have the text of the gospel in front of you as I talk, it's on page 815 of the Bibles.

John the Baptist

Our gospel began (vs 4) with this bald statement; *John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* John's mission is to call the people to repentance through baptism, and the purpose would seem to be that he is preparing the way for the Messiah, whom we know to be Jesus. In preparing the way, John the Baptist is fulfilling an ancient Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah, which is quoted for us in verse 2: *Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight..* So the repentance John is preaching and the baptism he is offering, is part of that ministry of preparing the way of the Lord; preparing the way for Jesus.

John the Baptist's preaching and baptising evidently had a considerable effect; verse 5 relates that *...there went out to him all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptised by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.* And he was a wild looking character: Mark tells us that *John was clothed with camel's hair, and had a leather girdle around his waist, and ate locusts and wild honey.*

John was very out of the ordinary in the way he lived and the way he preached. His brand of religion, if I can put it that way, was uncomfortable to the religious authorities in Jerusalem. When some Sadducees and Pharisees came out to see John the Baptist, St Matthew's Gospel tells us that he had this to say to them: *You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?* John the Baptist did not play things safe with religious convention; he spoke his mind, and was an outsider. It cost him his life in the end, beheaded by Herod. If we were to look for someone similar in more recent Christian history, I would think perhaps of John Wesley, the forefather of Methodism, who stood up against the lax and superficial religious practice of the Church of England of his time, and through his rallies and preaching from horseback called people to take the gospel more seriously to heart.

One Greater than I

It is likely that John the Baptist had a great following; yet he was very clear that he himself was not the Messiah, that he was a messenger preparing the way. If we look at Mark 1. 7,

we find John saying this to his followers: *After me comes he who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. I have baptised you with water; but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.*

John the Baptist is of course referring to Jesus; and thus, at the age of thirty of thereabouts, Jesus comes to John the Baptist seeking baptism. You might wonder why Jesus would need baptism at all, if he was the holy Son of God. In St Matthew's gospel there is a conversation between John and Jesus on this very point. John says to Jesus: *I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?* Jesus replies: *Let it be so for now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.*

Jesus' identification with us

Jesus, this Son of God, is perfect and holy; yet submits to be baptised like an ordinary sinner at the hands of John. Why is this? There is, I'm sure, something of humility here. But more importantly, there is something about Jesus identifying fully with us, with everything that it means to be fully human like you and me. And being baptised was one way of identifying fully with us. Yes, we believe that Jesus was not a sinner; *but* he knew every temptation that we know, and bears every burden that we bear. And so our Christian teaching is that Jesus was tempted as we are but without sin, as Hebrews 4.16 says.

I can't over emphasize that too much. Perfect in his divine nature, perfect in his human nature – yet Jesus was as human as you and I, and knows every sin, every temptation, every failure that we know and experience – and has redeemed those sins and failures for us, so long as we abide in him, and he abides in us. Jesus being baptised in the river Jordan like the lowliest sinner tells us that.

The Trinity

Now the final point I would like to make about this morning's gospel. In verses 9-11 we get Mark's actual account of the baptism of Jesus. This is what he says in vs.10: *And just as [Jesus] was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.*

Sometimes people say to me, 'Where do we find the Holy Trinity in the Bible?' I would say, as one instance, right here in the baptism of Jesus. This moment is what is known as a theophany (a showing of God); God the Son is baptised; God the Holy Spirit descends like a dove; God the Father speaks words of blessing from heaven.

And the wonder of it is that you and I, following Jesus, are baptised with that same baptism of repentance that Jesus received at the hands of John the Baptist; and so we too experience that theophany, that showing of God the Holy Trinity in our lives; for we are baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit; and the sign of the cross of Jesus, under whose salvation we come, was traced upon our foreheads, to show that we belong to him.