

Epiphany 2 - Baptism of The Lord Delivered by Rev'd Steve McMahon on the 13th January 2019

The Baptism of Christ brings with it so many problems that many preachers are more wary of it than of preaching on the Trinity.

Jesus, the Son of God, perfect God and perfect man. God knew that, as sin would enter the world through one man, it would be through one perfect, sinless man that salvation would be won. Let's make no mistake, Jesus was truly human. He knew pain, anguish, hunger, thirst, compassion, joy, love, all the emotions that single us out from the rest of creation, Jesus experienced in the same way that we experience them. Look at the Biblical stories of the wedding feast at Cana, the anguish over the death of Lazarus, the agony in the garden of Gethsemane and the suffering on the cross to see various documented examples of Jesus showing his human nature.

But he was also divine.

This is a mystery: how can God be truly God and also, at the same time, truly human? Did he need to keep switching from one to the other? Was he sometimes human and then, when necessary, become God? No. He was at all times both. Now this is not something that we can understand and misunderstandings about the nature of the incarnation have led to numerous heresies over the centuries. Jesus was not some form of "timeshare body" for God and man; he was perfectly both at the same time throughout his life on earth. We can't understand it. We can't analyse it and subject it to scientific scrutiny in order to rationalise and explain it. The important thing is that we believe it.

So if Jesus was truly perfect and sinless, he had nothing to repent about. If he had committed no sin, he had no need for forgiveness. So why, then, did he bother with a baptism of forgiveness?

This is the bit that causes and has caused great concern to thinking Christians the world over. Here was John the Baptist preaching: not the good news, but the news of terror to those who refused to believe him. In addition, he was standing in the river Jordan baptising for repentance, a way of symbolically cleaning away people's past wrongdoings in anticipation that they would start new, sinless lives. Why did Jesus need to do this? Jesus, as St. Luke makes clear in other instances, is without sin: of what does he need to repent?

For Jesus, this baptism was not so much a baptism of repentance but was a number of things.

Key among these was the fact that it was very much a moment of decision. Jesus was, by this time, thirty years old. For some time he must have known about his true self and what was in store for him and yet he had remained in Nazareth carrying on his carpentry despite being acutely aware that the time for him to go out and start his work (which would eventually lead to his death) was almost upon him. John the Baptist's emergence was the sign that the time had finally come, fulfilling the scriptures that the Messiah would be preceded by a herald such as John.

This was the first moment when Jesus could have decided not to bother, not to go on. Despite that he took the important step and made his decision - moreover he made it public. Jesus didn't participate in a quiet baptism with only a few friends and family present, but made it open before the amassed crowds.

In all our lives there are moments of decision, moments at which our lives can take one of two (or more) paths. We can either turn left or right - accept the decision or reject it. We can either have the courage to make the decision in which case we succeed, or we can ignore the decision and carry on just as before. In that instance we fail. In all our lives there are key, decisive moments, which we need to grasp. Failure to do so will leave is ruing forever that we didn't even try. An undecided life is a frustrated, wasted, even tragic life.

This was also a moment of identification. Jesus recognised that John was the herald that would point the way, but Jesus wasn't the only one to recognise this. Other Jews, knowledgeable about the prophecies handed down, would also have realised that Jesus was identifying himself at this point to be the chosen one who would free Israel. But moreover, Jesus was identifying himself with the people who needed him. Many great leaders have come from different backgrounds to the people or cause that they lead. It is the moment when we identify ourselves with any movement not for our sake but for the sake of others that we achieve true identification; when we stand up for the things that we believe. We should not be ashamed of the things in which we believe but should clearly make them known. As the song has it, "Your life is a sham till you can shout out "I am what I am"." Are we prepared to stand up for the things that we believe in? Are we prepared to stand up and be counted?

This was also a moment of approval for Jesus. We like to be told that we are doing the right thing, that we are on the right track. Jesus knew what his course was to be and was looking for God's seal of approval and got it. Notice that this telling of Jesus' baptism is slightly different to that set down in Matthew's gospel where the words are "This is my beloved Son". Here the words are "You are my beloved Son", a much more personal statement because God is speaking to Jesus directly.

Finally, this was a moment of equipment for it was the moment when Jesus received the Holy Spirit to give him the strength and power he would need in the coming years.

So what does this mean for us? On that day Jesus made his great decision, he stood up and was counted and received both the go-ahead and the power he would need for the battle. The same is true of us. If we are content to leave things the way that they are; if we are happy to preserve the status quo and leave everything up to other people then our lives will ultimately be worthless - we will have achieved nothing and we will know it. Lives are full of missed opportunities.

Seize the day, grasp the nettle, make the decision. Because in doing so, you will receive all the help and assistance needed from the Holy Spirit.