

Year B Epiphany 1 – 10 January 2021
Reverend Selina McMahon

Jesus' baptism has always been a bit of a mystery because it prompts the very difficult question, why. Why did Jesus get baptised?

It's a simple enough question to ask. After all, the baptism of Jesus is found in Matthew, Mark and Luke, and is alluded to in John's gospel. Theologians, scholars, and just plain folk like you and I are puzzled as to why Jesus was baptized. Remember, the baptism that John was offering was not the sacramental baptism that we have today. There were many ceremonial washings that took place in Jewish society and John made it clear that the baptism he offered was one of repentance for sins. So why did Jesus, who was sinless, receive, at John's hands, a baptism for repentance? What did Jesus need to repent from?

The honest answer is, we don't really know. Jesus himself, in Matthew's account, explains that it is needed for righteousness to be fulfilled but never explains exactly what that means. It's a riddle. A mystery, like so many of the fundamental truths that make up our faith.

Consider righteousness. To be righteous is not just to be good - it is to be in the right kind of relationship with God and with others - to be a relationship which brings salvation, which brings wholeness, which brings the good news of God's love, to others. Righteousness is something active - not simply a description of one's moral state.

So when Jesus says to John: - "let it be so, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness" what he is saying is - "do it, it is a good thing to do - because in this way we will go further towards saving others, we will deliver them from death, we will make God's loving purpose more evident, more accessible to others."

And indeed the baptism of Jesus does help bring the healing word of God to others; and it shows us, as well, how the saving message of Jesus is best delivered, because it shows that he identifies with us and with our sins and not only with God and God's perfection. Jesus did not need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins but he chose this path. He chose to be seen with us - as one of us. In his baptism Jesus identifies completely with us. He shows us that the way of righteousness, the way of saving others, is a way of empathy and understanding - of putting ourselves in someone else's shoes.

Jesus showed himself as being fully human. He puts himself in our shoes.

The baptism of Jesus marked the beginning of his ministry - it was his debut as it were - his coming out ceremony - and that at the end of it he received the approval of God, who speaks from heaven, and says: "this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." It was a significant event, a turning point in his life and through him - a turning point in our own lives. Jesus' baptism was a moment of identification – the spirit made it clear who he was. It was a moment of authorisation – God's words showed that Jesus was God's Son and had God's authority. And it was a moment of affirmation since Jesus, by his actions, had made God "well pleased".

It was in THAT moment that Jesus made his stand as a human being, that he took his first footstep on the road to the Cross.