

Baptism of the Lord

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By Trevor Williams

Introduction

How do you respond when you discover a belief you held was 'wrong' or 'not the whole story'? Do you welcome the new insight, or feel put down?

Someone recently remarked to me, "We think we are right". That statement is both obvious and true. It's necessary to know we are right about many things if we are to avoid living in constant confusion. It can be profoundly disturbing to learn we are 'wrong' or that what we held true was only partially correct. At such moments the potential for our competing egos to engage in conflict is never far away.

In this period after Christmas we continue to unpack the meaning of the incarnation. Last week the Gospel reading was the prologue to St John's Gospel, the eternal word comes as light shining in the darkness. Then on the 6th January we celebrated the Epiphany – the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles as represented by the Magi (Matthew 2:1–12). Now, just prior to commencing his ministry Jesus is baptised by John the Baptist. In this short passage the main characters enter with conflicting views and expectations. However as the story unfolds something new and valuable is discovered. Experience of conflict holds this possibility for each of us – to discover a truth that was previously hidden. It is also possible that this will be our experience as we encounter the story of Jesus' baptism.

Text

Matthew 3:13–17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Comment

John is taken by surprise

Matthew's Gospel gives us a clear insight into the preaching of John the Baptist. 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' (Matthew 3.2). The people responded in droves and flocked to the Jordan, and confessing their sins were baptized by John. Then in 3.7 "But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruit worthy of repentance.'"

The coming of the kingdom that John the Baptist proclaimed was to be an encounter with the holiness of God, with the inevitable judgement of sinful humanity. A baptism of repentance was the fitting preparation for the coming kingdom.

John was confused by Jesus' request to be baptized. John had preached "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (3.11-12). And this Jesus now comes to be baptized by John. John protests, it's the wrong way around. John wants Jesus' baptism.

John and Jesus had very different expectations of baptism. For Jesus baptism wasn't primarily about sin, or even status. It was about something else.

The Kingdom is all about relationships

Jesus responds to John's puzzlement by saying "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness."

The word 'righteousness' is difficult to translate accurately or interpret theologically – it can have a range of meanings. Certainly 'being righteous' means 'being in a right relationship with God'. And being in a right relationship with God means being in a right relationship with our neighbour. This is not surprising for what is most human about us is our capacity for relationship.

At this pivotal moment in Jesus' life, as he is about to embark on his God-given mission Jesus comes to affirm what is important to him about relationships. The Kingdom Jesus was to inaugurate is the 'Kingdom of Right Relationships'. Jesus joins with those responding to John as a preparation for the coming Kingdom and Jesus commits himself to God for all that lies ahead. Jesus is seeing baptism as a commitment of solidarity with God and neighbour rather than a mechanism to deal with 'sin.'

I find it helpful to think of sin, not in terms of breaking a rule or transgressing a moral code – that feels clinical and impersonal and in my view misrepresents what sin is. Sin is anything that devalues, damages or destroys a relationship with others. And since we are made for relationship, to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves, our 'sinful' actions, thoughts or attitudes undermine the purpose for which we were created, and in this way breaks our relationship with God.

Baptism is an act of commitment to live as God intended, prioritizing 'right relations' as our lifestyle. Those who came to John to be baptized, were making a public declaration of their response to God, to prepare for the coming kingdom, to

live in a loving relationship with God and their neighbour. To make that commitment authentic required a change of heart, mind and will, it required repentance. But the act of Baptism was more importantly the response to God's invitation to follow the path of love.

For me, that's how Jesus understood his baptism by John that would fulfil all righteousness.

God is revealed as Love

And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

This is the climax of the story. It is not whether John's baptism or Jesus' baptism is the right one. It is not about sin or repentance, it is not about the status of the baptiser, the climax is the voice from heaven, from the place where the reality of the kingdom already exists, and that voice declares a relationship with a Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased. Jesus hasn't started his mission, he hasn't done a thing, he has merely presented himself to God in baptism and he is pleasing to God.

God's unconditional, abiding love is encountered in Jesus baptism and is the source of all that will follow in Jesus' ministry, his life, teaching, death and resurrection. God's love is the foundational reality upon which Jesus based his life.

And the call of God to each of us, to come close and experience God's acceptance, and a sense of profound belonging, of being loved is what transforms our human existence into an experience of eternal life.

Response

The Church is seen by many as being obsessed by 'sin'? Could this be true? Why might this be so?

Do we recognise each member of our Church as 'beloved' by God? If so what difference could it make?

If the Kingdom of Heaven is the Kingdom of Right Relationships, in your experience of Church life, particularly in conflict, what priority is given to maintaining good relations with one another?

"Outwitted" by Edwin Markham (1852-1940)

He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

Prayer

Generous God, you are the source of all life
And in the waters of baptism
You immerse us in your loving embrace.
May we fulfil all righteousness
In extending to others,
The love which you have shown to us in Jesus.

Amen

Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Inner Journey