

Baptism of Christ, 8 January 2023

Isaiah 42.1-9; Ps 29; Acts 10.34-43; Matthew 3.13-end

At the beginning of a new calendar year with kindergartens, schools and universities reopening after the Christmas break we are reminded of Jesus' baptism by John in the river Jordan, which marks the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism is concise, but it can leave us a little puzzled. According to the New Testament witness John and Jesus are related to each other. They are second cousins. This helps explain why John replies to Jesus in today's gospel saying, 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me!' John knows Jesus and therefore knows that Jesus has something to offer him that he John cannot give himself. Jesus presenting himself to John for baptism upsets John's understanding of their respective importance having already said to those coming to him, 'but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals.' (Matthew 3:11)

Jesus' reply to John's 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me!' is, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Let's try and make some sense of those words, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' before hurrying on to the climax of this gospel reading, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'

A fuller translation of 'to fulfil all righteousness' is 'to fulfil and enact every righteous deed or ordinance'. This translation helps us to see first that Jesus is the one who comes to fulfil both the Law and the Prophets. He does this in two ways. He is the one who lives according to the Law thereby fulfilling all righteousness. He

lives you might say under the Law, but not as a life-inhibiting imperative, but rather as a life-giving source and he is also the one foretold by the prophets and so he is the one who fulfils God's promise to his people that a Saviour would come forth from the people, the Sun of Righteousness with healing in his wings.

The great feasts of Christmas and Epiphany help us to understand Jesus' response 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.', when we remind ourselves that the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, as John the Evangelist writes in the prologue to his Gospel. Throughout the New Testament witness the theme of God making himself small is a golden thread. We find it in the sentence we are focussing on. The 'for us' here is worth noting. Jesus working with John's cooperation fulfils all righteousness. The God who with Mary, Joseph, Simeon, and Anna of the tribe of Asher is bringing about the fulfilment of all righteousness. Our cribs and carols make this point of God becoming small forcefully,

Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth (from the carol Hark! The Herald Angels Sing)

God in Jesus becomes dependent on the good will of the Magi, who choose not to return to Herod. Jesus is dependent on the care and love of his parents. At his baptism as in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus is fulfilling the Father's will for him as the Son (capital S) according to every righteous deed and ordinance. 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want.' (Matthew 26.39) Words we echo week by week in the Lord's Prayer, 'Thy will be done' and which we address to God as 'our Father' as Jesus did. Paul writes, as

often quoted, 'finding himself in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death even death on a cross'. (Philippians 2:8) A form of death reserved for criminals and insurrectionists. And according to Luke it is alongside two criminals that Jesus is crucified. We are reminded of the words of the prophet Isaiah in one of the so-called Suffering Servant passages,

He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account. (Isaiah 53:3)

One of the words that we will be thinking of in relation to Jesus' baptism is humility, and the other is obedience. Jesus does not exalt himself. He is obedient to God's will. And it is through his obedience he shows his humility and it is through his humility he shows forth his obedience. That will sound a little confusing. It might sound a bit like the question, What came first the chicken or the egg? Tell me good sir, what came first obedience or humility? To my mind they both feed each other. I have seen people out of obedience to what they perceive to be God's will for them become humble and I have found those who are humble learn to become obedient to God's will as made known through Scripture and a disciplined Christian life. Not overnight, but gradually in time often with setbacks, but always mindful of their need of God's grace in their lives.

There is no need to think of this as a one-off movement from humility to obedience or obedience to humility, but rather one should think of it as ongoing, and ultimately as a life-giving movement to be traced again and again, if held in the framework of the Christian faith. What we find in Jesus and it radically marks the

beginning of his public ministry is both humility and obedience. And it is these two traits that we will want to give attention to and seek to find in others. Balancing one with the other. Allowing each to form and shape him, so that when Jesus goes to John, who is baptising, he submits to John's baptism, which is a baptism normally administered after the confessing of sins. (See Matthew 3.6)

We have arrived surprisingly at the great theme of the Christian story. It is Jesus who takes upon him the sin of the world. It is he who stands in the breach. It is he who intercedes for us. He aligns himself with his people and with all people, as he allows himself to be baptised by John, as he submits to John's baptism to fulfil all righteousness. He is the righteousness one. He is the innocent one, who in the river Jordan stands in solidarity with his sinful people. It is his sinlessness that will permeate the waters of baptism and will win for God a people made righteous by the shedding of his blood by fulfilling all righteousness.

Today I have laboured the words humility and obedience as personified in Jesus' ministry particularly at the outset of his public ministry, but also by looking ahead to his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives not far from John the Baptist's supposed birthplace outside of Jerusalem his father, Zechariah, being a priest according to the sons of Aaron. But today I wish us not only to see his humility and his obedience, but also his solidarity with all those who are willing and ready to confess their sins before God and come to him to be reborn in the waters of baptism. This is consistent with what John the Baptist says a little earlier in Matthew's gospel,

'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.'

We have identified three things that lead to the opening of the skies and the great proclamation at the outset of Jesus' public ministry. God's humility made manifest in the Jesus, the goodness of obedience made manifest in Jesus, God's solidarity with his people made manifest in Jesus as he stands in the River Jordan and his baptised by John. Only then do we see the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit descending and hear those much loved words spoken, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' And hearing those words be reminded of today's psalm,

The voice of the Lord is mighty in operation:
the voice of the Lord is a glorious voice.

The voice of the Lord breaks the cedar-trees:
the Lord breaks in pieces the cedars of Lebanon.

May we learn obedience, may we learn humility, may we acknowledge our sins, seek repentance and righteousness and stand in solidarity with all people by faithful lives lived according to God's will, which will embrace sacrificial living towards God.

I end with some words of Paul that make the point that Matthew is making, that Jesus' ministry is making, 'For our sake he made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' (2 Corinthians 5:21)

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