

**The Baptism of Christ – sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison**

**All Saints' Church, Nottingham, 13<sup>th</sup> January 2019**

We have celebrated the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, and his incarnation – God made man, God with us, the Word made flesh. Last Sunday the Church marked the Epiphany of our Lord – the revelation of Jesus Christ to the world, as symbolised by the coming of the wise men from the East, bringing their precious gifts. Today, however, we jump forward in time: Jesus is now a grown man, and is about to begin his ministry of teaching, healing, forgiving, and confronting those who had strayed from God's path of love and justice. But before all this, he comes to John the Baptist.

John the Baptist had for some time been calling the people to repent; to turn away from sin and return to God; to undergo a change of heart, mind and behaviour. He has become known as the Forerunner of Christ; the last of the Old Testament prophets; and of course was to die a horrible and untimely death as a consequence of his standing up to the immoral behaviour of King Herod. Jesus, then, comes to John at the Jordan. He enters the waters and is baptised. A voice from heaven is heard, saying, 'This is my Son, my beloved, in him I am well pleased' – or 'on whom my favour rests'. The big question, though, which has vexed Biblical scholars through the years, is 'Why?' Why did Jesus, the Son of God, need to be baptised – since the baptism given by John was for the forgiveness of sins, and Jesus, the Christ, the Messiah, was free from sin? Surely Jesus did not need to repent, as ordinary people did? In the account of Jesus' baptism which we find in the gospel of St Matthew, we read that John himself realises this, and tries to dissuade Jesus from being baptised. He says that it is in fact he who needs to be baptised by Jesus, rather than the reverse. Jesus, however, replies saying that it is right to go ahead with his baptism, 'for the sake of righteousness', or 'for the sake of what is right' – or 'in order to do all that uprightness demands'.

But what is the meaning of these enigmatic words? There are various possible explanations:

- It may have been, in part at least, so that Jesus could demonstrate his humility, and his readiness to identify fully with the people he came to serve and save. Compare this, for example, with the words of St Paul in his letter to the Philippians: by coming to earth, Jesus 'emptied himself', or 'humbled himself', in spite of being in the form of a God.

- Part of the explanation for Jesus being baptised could also be that he saw himself as standing in the place of the people of Israel as a whole, who did need to repent, to be baptised, and to turn afresh to God – just as in due course he was to offer himself as a sacrifice on the people, paying a price for the sins committed by others.
- Could it also have been that Jesus believed that his heavenly Father was urging him to begin his ministry in this way? In being baptised by John, therefore, Jesus demonstrated his obedience – just as Mary, his mother, had obeyed the words of God spoken through the angel Gabriel.
- It is possible, also, that Jesus didn't actually realise at that time the full scope and nature of who he was, being Son of God, and that there was actually no need for him to demonstrate a personal repentance of sin. Being fully human, as well as fully God, he might well have simply been assuming that his imperfections and weaknesses needed the cleansing of baptism, just like those of everybody else.
- It could also have been that by going through with baptism by John, he was deliberately and publicly saying that ritual cleansing from sin did not have to be done only in the Temple at Jerusalem. He could well have been presenting the people with an alternative, and more inclusive, way for people to return to God. There would quite probably have been lots of people who came to John to repent and be baptised who would not have been admitted to the Temple, because they were deemed to be unclean under the Jewish Law. Jesus, then, can be seen as endorsing John's radical and indeed subversive approach to the established religion of the time.

The answer, then, to my original question, 'Why did Jesus go through with his baptism by John', probably consists of some combination of all these factors. But Jesus' baptism is also the moment for something else which was hugely significant. We read in the gospel account of the baptism that 'The heavens opened and Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming upon him. And suddenly there was a voice from heaven: this is my Son, the Beloved, on whom my favour rests'. However we understand what actually happened at this moment, the gospel writer is conveying various elements of the deep inner meaning of the baptism. It shows a divine endorsement of what Jesus came to earth to do; describing Jesus as God's Son is the highest possible name he could be given. The image of the dove not only suggests the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus, but would also be a reminder of the renewal of the earth following the ancient flood in the time of Noah. The words heard from heaven are in fact a combination of words from psalm 2, which describes the

enthronement of a king, and Isaiah 42, which describes a servant who suffered on behalf of his people – so we have a combined image, therefore, of one who is both a king but one who serves and suffers for others. There has been a big debate in the past regarding whether Jesus was someone ‘adopted’ by God at his baptism – but the majority view is that such theories of what is called ‘adoptionism’ are wrong, and that Jesus was Son of God right from the moment of his birth.

There is much which can be discovered, therefore, from the brief description of Jesus’ baptism which we find in this morning’s Gospel, from St Luke, as well as in the parallel account in the Gospel of St Matthew. Jesus humbles himself before John and before his heavenly Father; his offering of himself is endorsed by his Father and he receives God’s commissioning; and he begins his ministry as a servant of God but also as a King. All this is sometimes seen as one of several ‘Epiphanies’ of our Lord – in which he was revealed Son of God, in his glory.

After his baptism, Jesus went into the wilderness and was tested by Satan. He then returned to Galilee, and, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, taught in the synagogues and elsewhere. He was soon to present what is sometimes called the Nazareth Manifesto of good news for the poor and freedom for those who were oppressed. His message of compassion, hope and love was to bring thousands to hear him and to receive the touch of his love. But his was to be a dangerous and lonely journey, in which he was finally to give even his very life for what he believed was right, and through his love for those he came to serve.

In some ways, Jesus did not need to be baptised. But it was so typical of who he was that he went through with it even though it conferred no particular benefit upon himself. And surely this lies at the heart of the Christian life; we are to do things not primarily for what we might gain for ourselves, but for the greater good and so that God’s will may be done. Amen.