

Baptism of Jesus

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 12 January, 2020

A Contemporary Reflection by Dawn Robson

Christmas 3A

Isaiah 42: 1-9; Matthew 3: 1-17;

Contemporary Reading: *Song of the Builders*, by Mary Oliver

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wh2x6SN3L-s>

“Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near. You pack of snakes! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

These are the words spoken by John the Baptist to the crowds coming to him for baptism; not a benign and cheery “Good morning”, or “Welcome”. If Sunday morning at Pitt St began with those words, some of you mightn’t return.

So, who was John the Baptist?

The First Century Jewish historian, Josephus, reports that John was a significant person in his own right a historical figure. A Jewish prophet with his own message and his own disciples, who ran afoul of Herod Antipas and was imprisoned and executed by him.

The writer of Luke’s gospel tells us that he was a relative of Jesus, but Matthew doesn’t mention that. In Matthew, John the Baptist remains a marginal figure, parallel to Jesus and subordinate to him, commended and respected yet who does not become a disciple of Jesus.

I’m puzzled as to why John and his disciples did not become followers of Jesus. John’s disciples continued on as a separate group even after Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the beginning of the early Christian community. It’s interesting that John the Baptist represents an ally in the cause of the Kingdom of God, yet does not belong to the Christian community.

In Matthew’s gospel, the first two chapters are to do with the birth of Jesus, and then the doors of the gospel suddenly swing open, and there stands John the Baptist in the muddy Jordan River in the wilderness of Judea - a wild-looking man in a camel-hair robe, smelling of locusts and honey. It’s a shock to see him. His surprising appearance is a claim that God’s ways with the world are often strange, unforeseen and unpredictable.

It’s significant that John baptised in the Jordan River. This is an important river in the history of the Hebrew (Jewish) people, and it’s mentioned many times in the Old Testament. Remember the story of the Exodus, of Moses leading the promised people through the wilderness away from the slavery in Egypt.

He eventually led them to the Jordan River and could see the Promised Land on the other side? But it was Joshua who led the Hebrew people across the Jordan River into Canaan to begin new lives.

The river Jordan was the border between the wilderness and the land of milk and honey. One of my favourite hymns is "*Guide me O Thou Great Redeemer*". The third verse starts – as I'm sure you all know - "*When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside! Death of death and hell's destruction land me safe on Canaan's side*".

There are some Negro spirituals that also mention the Jordan River. It's just one of those places - one of those "thin" places where heaven and earth almost meet. You can see the banner behind me, with the land of milk and honey on one side and the desert on the other - and the Jordan River dividing the two.

Now, back to John again. Why did John baptise?

Well, ritual immersions and washing were already practised in Judaism. It wasn't new to Christianity. They were practised in the Temple, in public places and religious households. It was especially used for Gentiles converting to the Jewish faith.

Life was difficult for the Jewish people at the time of Jesus. They were occupied and ruled by the Romans, and were oppressed by their own rulers too. They longed for a time when they could live their lives in peace.

John the Baptist had a vision of the Jewish nation returning to God again, being God's faithful people and keeping their part of the covenant. His call to repentance was really a call to the nation to be who they were meant to be – God's family. Their forebears crossed the Jordan to be the people of God, but the people somehow lost the vision of what that meant. So John practised his baptism in the Jordan and so recalled the vision of their forebears when they crossed the river with Joshua many years earlier.

We Australians once had a vision of ourselves as a country of "*the fair go*" but how often now do you hear that term? It seems to have faded out and been replaced by "*If you have a go, you'll get a go*". How good's that!! I believe that as a nation we've lost the vision of "a fair go for all".

In places ravaged by catastrophic bush fires, people there have been calling for a fair go as they seek resources to rebuild their lives, homes, and communities. Will the old fair go come into its own again?

In a similar way John called his nation to return to their vision, to remember who they once were and could be again, and pointed to Jesus as the One who enacts that vision.

Matthew's story skips from Jesus being an infant to Jesus as a 30-year old, when he went to the Jordan River to where John was baptising, and joined the queue of folk waiting to be baptised.

Jesus was eager to be baptised but John hesitated. He asked: "Who? Me?" "Why me?"

John had real misgivings about his worthiness so he and Jesus stood in the river and argued about who should baptise whom. I think we've all had times in our lives when we have been asked to perform a task that we don't feel worthy of, or that someone else could do better.

This is the first time in Matthew's gospel that Jesus actually speaks. It is to say he needs to be baptised, because maybe baptism will help him learn who he's meant to be. Jesus leans back into the water because he believes that God is calling him to a different kind of life.

When Jesus stands up, the waters of the Jordan dripping down his face, he sees the Spirit descending like a dove to rest upon his head. The Spirit comes, not as an all-consuming fire of judgment, but with the flutter of hopeful wings. A voice says "*You are my child. I love you. I'm delighted with you.*"

We may not remember the details of our own baptism. Perhaps, like me, you were a baby, gently held while a kind hand trickled water over your forehead. Maybe we were adults, and water was poured over our heads. We recently witnessed Kent being baptised here at Pitt St in that way. Some in this congregation previously belonged to other denominations where baptism meant total immersion. Other folk may never have been baptised, but made a decision to commit their lives to God and are also part of the Christian family.

Each baptised Christian has been acknowledged as a child of God: a member of the same loving family in which Jesus is a dearly loved son. Promises were made, either for us or by us, to renounce evil and oppression and to follow in the way of Jesus.

As we make our way slowly into faith through the years, we grow in understanding of what our baptism means. That's how it was for Jesus too, at least in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus spent all the days and years that followed that day in the Jordan River discovering the meaning of his baptism. He gave everything, his dreams, his labours and his life itself. Jesus gave himself to God's people, taking his place with hurting people. Baptism was his commissioning to ministry.

During the week before his death, the leaders of the temple challenged Jesus: "*By what authority are you doing these things?*" He answered with a reference to his baptism: "*Was the baptism of John from heaven or not? I was baptised. That's why I do the things I do*". In the waters of baptism, Jesus heard the Spirit calling him to speak the truth fearlessly and to live with grace. He died young, because he took his baptism seriously.

Baptisms, like most beginnings, continue to find meaning long after the event. Beginning is often easy, while finishing is often hard. It's like we are handed a map, but then we have to take the trip. It takes our whole lives to finish the journey we began when we're baptised or make a commitment.

The gymnasium that Lionel and I attend most mornings is full of new faces at this time of the year. I guess folk have eaten (and drunk) too much through December and have signed up for 12 months membership in the hope of slimming down and getting fit. We regulars don't get upset that our gym space is a little crowded. We know that within a couple of months most of these folk will have disappeared. They probably will have other commitments, or have got used to being one size larger.

At baptism we are incorporated into the Kingdom of God, and we plan to grow in the faith and commit our lives to reflecting the love of Jesus. We have to remain vigilant and not be diverted by other attractions and commitments, to not get used to being a little sloppy in the way we practise our Christianity.

One of the Bible commentaries I referred to said:

Children of God are called to tell the truth in a world that lies, give in a world that takes, love in a world that lusts, make peace in a world that fights.

Baptism is our ordination to ministry, our vow to live with more concern for the hurting than for our own comfort, to share our time and resources with the poor and listen to the lonely.

At Christmas we are reminded that God wants to be with us, to live in us, as Emmanuel.

Who? Me?

Who? Us?

As members of God's family, we have work to do in this life. It is a work of faith, a belief in the Christ who came among us and lived a human life, in the Spirit that lights the way we are to follow, and that even in the darkest times, there is a God – there IS a God! Whose voice calls out that we are dearly loved too.

Yes, You!

Yes, Me!