

The Baptism of Jesus: What it means for us

Preached by Murray Wills
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9am All Saints'

Mark 1:4-11
Acts 19 1:7

May the words on my lips and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you my Lord and Saviour, Amen.

Our reading today is from the very beginning of Mark's Gospel.

Mark doesn't write about the birth or youth of Jesus. He picks up the story 30 years after Jesus birth in Nazareth. According to Mark, this is where the good news of Jesus, the Messiah, God's son starts.

He then immediately moves to the preaching of John the Baptist, whose ministry burst upon the surprised Jewish world. They had been looking for a sign from God, a Messiah to lead them against the Romans, and here was a prophet telling them to repent and splashing them with water.

Mark is a master of the swift moving story where, at pace, he describes Jesus' ministry.

Marks reminds us that Jesus' baptism is the fulfilment of the prophesy of the "messenger" promised by the prophet Isaiah (40:3. Malachi 3:1), a promise reiterated by John's own explanation of Jesus' baptism.

There are some fundamental questions that arise out of this text. John has already established for the crowd that Jesus is more powerful than him; and that he (John) is "not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals." ⁸ Further, that he has baptised them with water; but he (Jesus) "will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.", but the two questions I would like us to reflect on today are:

1. Why was Jesus baptised?
2. What does our baptism mean?

Why is Jesus' baptised? Interestingly, we're not the first to ask this. Jesus' baptism by John was one of the early and rather tricky questions the Evangelists had to deal with.

Baptism by John had two components -- repentance and forgiveness (Mark 1:4). As John explains what took place with Jesus, he adds that the baptism is not only with water, but with the Holy Spirit.

Those elements are still true of baptism today. The baptismal liturgy marks the end of our old life ("Do you renounce ... ") and the beginning of a new life lived in God's grace and forgiveness.

John then adds a new component with the gift of the Holy Spirit, also part of our baptism service (“... you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit ...”).

Jesus’ baptism was a penitential act, confession and repentance of sin before the multitudes who were there, but Jesus is sinless so why is the Messiah’s first public appearance to take part in baptism?

Mark talks about Jesus’ eternal identity but in his earthly one also. These things are linked, undivided and whole, from the ground up and the heavens down.

Michael Casey in the book “Fully Human, Fully Divine” has some useful insights into why:

1. Baptism is a physical act. Jesus, having assumed our flesh with all its liabilities and weaknesses as his own seeks a remedy. He humbles himself and submits to John as he expects us to be baptised.
2. Jesus was acutely burdened by sin – not as the result of any personal transgression but simply as the effect of his total solidarity with a sinful humanity.

Each of us carries a burden of sins committed, not just by us but by a sinful society or for past injustices by other humans. We can seek to minimise future harm, apologies, make amends or shield others from harm. We can repent on behalf of others and seek to bring about change. Jesus reached out to the

marginalised and he was charged with consorting with sinners. Jesus shared their lives, and became the God of compassion in their midst. His heart was large enough to make him want to carry the sin of the world.

So, it is as our representative, as the bearer of our collective guilt that Jesus seeks forgiveness through baptism.

Casey writes:

“The weight of this far exceeds the capacity of one man to sustain it and so he sinks beneath the surface of the waters into the darkness. First-century Jews were not an aquatic people. Wild water was something to be feared, representing as it did, the power of unreasoning chaos. To be baptized involved yielding control...” p.32 Baptism dissolved past identities.

When Jesus is baptised, it was in full awareness of sin that created separation of us from God.

As he rises from the water the miraculous occurs, God intervenes. The sky is split and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove. And a voice comes from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.’ And so, at his baptism, Jesus doesn’t have to do anything, but rather receive the gift of the Holy Spirit and of God’s favour.

It is at that point that we know that nothing, not even sin can separate us from the love of God.

Later on, toward the close of his ministry, Jesus himself makes it clear that baptism leads to a new way of life.

When the brothers James and John ask to be seated next to Jesus in the life to come, Jesus points out that “the baptism with which I am baptised, you will be baptised” (Mark 10:39). To be baptised in Jesus is to follow him.

The second question is what does Baptism mean for us?

After Jesus finished with his life on this earth and his followers became the early Christian church, they further developed what baptism means for us.

The process starts immediately at Pentecost, when God gives the disciples the gift of the Spirit to carry on this new life in Christ. After his sermon on Pentecost, the listeners ask the apostle Peter how they should respond, he answers with these same three components of baptism: “Repent and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins will be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

As we continue in the New Testament, our understanding of what baptism means for us continues to unfold. It always follows faith -- the faith of the person being baptised (Acts 8:13,36), or the faith of the parents (Acts 16:15, 30-33; 18:8, 1 Corinthians 1:16).

How many of you remember your baptism? I don't remember mine as I was a baby or probably around 3 months or so. We have family and God Parents who spoke for us at our baptism if we were baptised as a child and we affirmed our faith again at confirmation and in my case ordination.

Following what Jesus said in Mark 10, in baptism we die, as Jesus did, but we are also raised to new life, as Jesus was (Romans 6:3-5, Colossians 2:12, Titus 3:5). This great promise has sustained Christians throughout the centuries. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer was led to his death, he said to one of the prison guards, “For some this is the end, but for me it is the beginning” We die in baptism, but we rise up to new life in Christ!

Furthermore, baptism is more than an individual act. In baptism we become part of a people. The Apostle Paul emphasizes how “we were all baptised into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13). We become part of the body of Christ. Part of a family.

We often speak of baptism as a “means of grace,” that is, one of the ways that God's grace comes to us. Physically it's only a small splash of water, but it marks the beginning of a whole new life -- of forgiveness, of the presence of God's Spirit, of our union with Jesus, and our becoming part of the world-wide Christian church!

In Holy Baptism God just chooses us. In Holy Baptism, God says that we are pleasing to God and deserve to be loved. And that

this identity of being God's beloved child cannot be taken away from us or, for that matter, lost by us. Rather, God continues to come into our lives to call us beloved and blessed and promise once again to be always both with us and for us. That promise and blessing, in turn, helps us face all the challenges of life.

Like Jesus we have our earthly life, and our eternal life.

The key thing is that through the gift of baptism we have a relationship with God.

Problems at home or in the community, concerns about the world or our personal lives. We can face whatever might be plaguing us with greater confidence knowing that God is on our side.

God will not abandon us but will walk alongside us, strengthening us, encouraging us, granting us grace sufficient to become the people God wants us to be. If we take the time to listen to God, not just but especially in the difficult moments God will show us the way.

As we heard in Mark "You are my beloved child. With you I am well pleased."

So, If I was to sum up our two questions today they would be:

1. Why was Jesus baptised?

For us and our righteousness, for the remission of our sins.

2. What does our baptism mean?

Through Baptism, God adopts us as his own children. From that moment onwards, we are part of his Church. We are born again into a new life with God. So, let's remember as part of the family to share our ups and downs, and ask God for direction in our lives. God wants this for us.

Amen

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