

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

The Baptism of Jesus was an important event in his life because it marked the start of his public Ministry. Up until that time, for thirty years, he had remained in Nazareth working in Joseph's carpentry shop, helping to support his family.

The emergence of John the Baptist from the wilderness, calling the people to repentance and baptising them with water, was a sign for Jesus that his time had come; when he must put into action the purpose for which he had been sent into the world.

It is impossible to know how fully aware Jesus was, at this stage of his life, as to whom he was and how God's purposes for him were to be worked out in his life, but it is reasonable to assume that God's revelation on this matter must have come as a gradual or growing awareness, according to his natural development, physically, mentally and spiritually. The little we know about him when at the age of twelve he went missing in Jerusalem and was found in the Temple questioning the Teachers gives us reason to think this. Then there would have been the stories surrounding his birth, which probably his mother or other members of his family would have made known to him.

In the same way, it is more than likely that John knew of the special circumstances regarding the birth of Jesus. Jesus was his cousin, born six months after John. They were very close in age, although John had been dedicated as a Nazarite or Holy Man from his very early years. In St Luke's Gospel we are told that when Elizabeth, John's mother, was in the sixth month of her pregnancy on the occasion of Mary's visit to her, the babe "leaped in her womb". She was given fore-knowledge by the Holy Spirit that Mary was to be the mother of the promised Messiah. She says, "why is it that the mother of my Lord has come to visit me"?

John knew there was something very special about Jesus. I think, at this time, he believed that Jesus was the promised Messiah, although later during Jesus' Ministry he was to question it. When John was asked if he was the 'promised one', he said, "there is one coming who is greater than I, whose sandal I am not worthy to unloose. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire". In St John's Gospel he points to Jesus as the "lamb of God". It's worth remembering that the devout Jews of Israel had been waiting with great longing, for many Centuries, for the one who had been foretold by the Prophets, who would be the Saviour of the world and make their Nation great once again. It is not surprising, therefore, that John was quite taken aback when Jesus came to him, in the River Jordan, requesting to be baptised. The Baptism of John was for sinners – those members of the Jewish nation who had turned their backs on God and forgotten his ways, forgotten the glorious past of Israel, those, who to some extent had lost their faith and had become immune to the 'calling' of God, and through the passage of time had thrown overboard the precepts and designations of their forefathers and had gone their own way, getting what they could out of life for themselves. For 400 years the voice of prophesy had been silent and John's preaching and baptism was exciting. It was good news. God had not forgotten them after all. God was still with them. God was a reality. If Jesus was the promised Messiah, then in John's mind, he had no need for the baptism of repentance for sins. But Jesus assures John that it is necessary for him to be baptised.

He wanted to be a part of this new exciting ‘movement’ which was happening all around him, in Jerusalem, in all of Judea, and throughout the region of Jordan. He knew this was right. During his Ministry he was totally involved in the world, with those who were sinners. He suffered himself the miseries of the weak, the helpless and the oppressed. He came to be ‘one of us’, even if it meant standing in the deep waters with us.

It was on this occasion that Jesus both heard the voice of God saying “this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased” and saw the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove. God the Father, the Creator of the Universe, was acknowledging Jesus as his son., and anointing him with the Holy Spirit for his threefold role as Prophet, Priest and King. It must have helped to confirm in Jesus’ mind the knowledge of who he was and the reason for which he was sent.

This event serves to remind us that we, also, through our baptism and confirmation belong to God. We have been accepted as the sons and daughters of God who is alive and reigns in heaven. Like Jesus, and as Jesus taught his disciples, we can call God ‘Our Father’. Because we belong to God we are beloved of God and God takes care of us. I wonder, sometimes, if we really appreciate the amazing truth of this that we have God as our Father. Through Jesus Christ we have been adopted into the family of God. Not that we have ever done anything to deserve it, but it has been given us by grace. Jesus Christ died for us and rose again, that we might also belong to God.

The Collect for this Sunday is in the form of a prayer of dedication: “that we may be inspired as God’s children, who are born of water and the Spirit, to surrender our lives to his service and that we may rejoice to be called the sons and daughters of God.” To surrender ourselves – this is the key to the Christian life. It means that whatever happens to us, God will always take care of us. By faith we need to believe in Him. However dark things may seem at times, God will be with us and there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

May the God of all grace, who called us into his eternal glory in Christ Jesus, restore, establish, and strengthen us on a firm foundation: to whom be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.