

## **Baptism of Jesus**

Have you ever wondered why Jesus was baptised? We understand that Baptism is about repentance – but Jesus had no sin. Why was he baptised? Well, baptism has never simply been about repenting from sin. In fact in the incident we read of this morning – all three members of the Trinity are involved. Obviously there is Jesus himself, then there is the Holy Spirit descending upon him like a dove, and then there is the voice of the Father, offering the gift of his son to the world.

It is worth, as usual, considering the context. John was Baptising in the river Jordan. This was the very place where many centuries earlier, Joshua led the Hebrews through the river and into the promised land. Passing through this water was passing from a state of slavery and wandering, into a place of God's blessing. And, as last week, we remember that the name Jesus is simply the name Joshua translated into Greek.

### **Son:**

By being baptised, Jesus is re-enacting the history of Israel – but it is a whole era of history that goes down into the water. As Jesus rises from the watery grave, a drama ensues.

Firstly, by undergoing baptism – he was making an enormous political statement. There would be no need for baptism if Israel was already fine and all was working well. The baptism of the son of God locates Israel with those who cannot accept that life as they know it is all that God meant it to be. Being baptised has never simply been an individual act of spiritual obedience. In Baptist history, even in 16<sup>th</sup> century Britain, those who were baptised as adults, were thereby saying that their Baptism as children did not count – and by saying that it was an act of political defiance, undermining the structures of society. It was at least as true in the day of Jesus – the Baptism of Jesus is the condemnation of the status quo in Israel.

Baptism says that an exodus is still necessary, in this context it means there is still a slavery encountered, still an exile to return from. So the baptism of Jesus from the outset, locates the son of God with the face of human suffering, and longing for salvation. That is why Jesus is baptised, and that is the deepest level at which his baptism identifies him with us. To be baptised says that all is not well with me, and all is not well with the world. It locates the candidate in a hopeless situation, of despair, of longing, of expectation.

The 101<sup>st</sup> airborne division of the US army entered Germany, as US troops were retreating. The officer in charge of the retreating troops declared, “it's hopeless, you're virtually surrounded!” The paratrooper replied, “we're airborne – we're supposed to be surrounded!” For God, as for those in a privileged world – baptism locates us in an ugly place, where we face the pain and injustice and disintegration of the world in all its ugliness.

This may run rather counter to some of the logic of baptism as it is often told. Baptism is about serious belief, faith so strong that you could eat your dinner off it. Absolute certainty and deep-seated belief in the goodness of God. But we can arrive at those convictions prematurely. If baptism is readiness to face the real world head on, if baptism is locating yourself in a position of suffering, and longing and hope – then you locate yourself into a position where you might well, as a result of your commitment, end up doubting God.

This is the path that lay ahead of Jesus himself, in his cry – my God my God why have you forsaken me. If your faith has been tested and you have survived – it doesn't mean that you never doubted God for one second – real faith allows you to question not only the existence of God but the goodness of God. John the Baptist was to do precisely this several months later – are you the one who is to come, or should we expect another? When you position yourself so as to face real hardship and suffering – you cannot but question where God is.

## **Spirit**

In Jesus day, the heavens had been closed for business for some time! The people longed for God to act, longed for divine intervention in history, for a new exodus, for a genuine return from exile and entry into the land of blessing.

But then we read of the Holy Spirit that descended upon Jesus in bodily form like a dove. It's worth trying to picture the physicality of this. I once had a bird descend upon me in bodily form. It was in Lyme Regis, in Dorset – and the bird in question was a seagull, and I had just been to the chip shop. It descended upon me, in order that it might subsequently ascend, with my battered sausage in its talons. (Where's my sausage?)

Sadly that wasn't the last time in my life that I find myself empty handed, shocked, and looking towards the heavens.

The experience of Israel at this stage of history, was one of forces beyond their control descending upon them and taking away what was precious to them. They were in the promised land, but it was possessed by hostile pagan forces. And the cry of the Israelites to God, expressed by Isaiah on more than one occasion, was "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down." But the heavens remained closed. There was no hope.

But then the Spirit descends like a dove upon Jesus. At the end of the flood, the dove descends with the twig, bringing to Noah the promise of life. So too, the coming of the Holy Spirit brings the promise of life and blessing.

The opening of heaven and the coming of the Spirit say that God is active here and now, that this world is the arena of God's action. This Gospel begins with the tearing of the heavens, and ends with the tearing of the curtain in the temple – the veil between God and his people has been torn. In fact, the New Testament begins with the tearing of the heavens and the Spirit descending upon Jesus, and ends with angels marvelling that the dwelling place of God is with people.

And for Isaiah it was not only in its bewildered pleas that Israel would ask for God to tear open the heavens and come down. It was also in its prophecy, Shower, O heavens from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness. The opening of the heavens is the hope of the world – God has heard the prayers of his people.

## **Father**

The Son has been baptised, the Spirit has appeared, and now the voice of God is heard. "This is my son, the beloved, with whom I am well pleased." I wonder why He said that? Here in the person of Jesus, the whole of Israel is embodied. The implication is that, whatever was happening in Jerusalem, whatever was happening in the life of Israel was not well-pleasing to

God. But here, Jesus is God's gift to the people. In Jesus, God gives the people everything they need.

But hold on a minute – God says he is well pleased with Jesus, but Jesus hasn't done very much yet! The people have not yet been set free! The nation is still oppressed. The liberation of Israel still hasn't happened! If, as Emil Brunner said, in Jesus God gives the people everything they need, perhaps that means that the people have thus far not understood what they need.

If God is supposed to be rending the heavens and coming down, if he is visiting and redeeming his people, he is not doing it in the way that people expect. Now, I suspect that I am not the only one with a blue print for how God should answer the prayers we pray. If he really is God, then surely he can put an end to injustice, and suffering, and breakdown. If he really is God, then why should these things be allowed to continue for one more moment. Why, if there is a God in heaven, must 2008 see all the bloodshed, and starvation, and suffering that it inevitably holds? What is God going to do about it?

Well, I suppose we're in dangerous territory now, as this is one of the problems about God that has been discussed and debated at length by some of the greatest minds in history. But the baptism sharpens our focus not on the generalities of the world, or theories about how it works. It focuses our attention upon a vulnerable individual, born into a violent time, and destined for a sticky end.

And maybe, ending suffering in the world is not our job. Maybe our job instead is to focus upon this Jesus, and to see what he does with our lives and with the world. But this is not to be merely inward looking – remembering that if we are baptised, then we have positioned ourselves to identify with suffering, and bewilderment, and expectation and longing. Nor is it to abandon real hope in the search for a sentimental Jesus – because we have the Spirit, we hope for God to act into our situation.

I am reading a book at the moment, written by a fiercely atheist, highly successful political activist. And at the end of the book, he is asked a number of questions. Among which is the question of who, in his political activism, he has come to admire the most. And he lists two people, whom he said he never would have expected to be on his list. The author is deeply critical of Christianity, and has a profound dislike of Christian mission. And yet the two people he admires the most are Christian missionaries – catholic priests, who – at the centre of their lives, celebrate a daily communion. Like Jesus, they have positioned themselves in tough contexts and share the hopes and fears of their people, and at their communion, they pray for and encounter the heavens being torn open. And so, finally, these two priests have won the admiration of the most critical writer I know, because their Christ-centred, spirit led worship, has unimaginable political consequences.

May our lives and the life of the church be well pleasing to God,  
May our worship manifest such devotion to Christ as to shake the foundations of our world.  
May our lives and the life of the church be living proof that the heavens are open.