

BAPTISM OF JESUS: What's in a Name

Matthew 3:13-17 [MW20-02]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 12 January 2020

What's in a name?

In the 'good old days' George Farmer looked after animals and grew crops like wheat

- Jack Miller took the wheat and made it into flour at his water mill
- Bill Baker took the flour and made it into bread
- if we were named according to our profession, trade or talents
 what might we be called ... Prudence Secretary? Fred Mechanic? Mildred Musician?
- would anyone think of calling us "Christian", "Godwoman", "Preacher"?

Today's gospel reading tells of a man named according to his religious convictions

- he is ... you guessed it ... John Baptist
- and this [hold up cake of soap] might give us a clue
- yes it is a cake of soap
- most of us use soap or detergent in some way every day
- to clean our bodies, dishes, clothes, floors, windows, pets, cars
- cleaning the outside of our heads with soap and shampoo is pretty straight forward
- gets rid of the grease and grime, gives us a fresher look (and smell)
- cleaning the *inside* of our heads is pretty straight forward too
- though may be we don't do it as often as we should!

The approach suggested by John Baptist was confession and repentance

- this cleans away the dirt and grime
- in preparation for God's forgiveness and love

In John Baptist's time an important part of Jewish ritual

- was the *symbolic* washing and purifying of the people when they gathered for worship
- but if someone who was not born a Jew wished to join as a worshipper
- and follower of the Jewish faith
- they had to be completely immersed in water
- baptism in running water symbolised the complete washing away
- of all that was impure and unclean, of a sinful past life

Now John Baptist's take on this was very, very different

- and was a large part of the reason he was at odds with the religious hierarchy
- it was completely revolutionary
- John Baptist said Jews needed to submit themselves to a cleansing that had
- up until the very time he strode on to the scene
- been reserved exclusively for non-Jews

John Baptist was taking a remarkable stand and marking a huge dividing line in the sand

- he was saying you did not become one of God's chosen people
- simply because you were a descendant of Abraham
- the ancestor of the Jewish people
- you become part of the people of God through confession and repentance
- through a cleansing baptism in water
- John Baptist in fact saw little difference between Jew and Gentile!
- all had sinned and all needed cleansing before God
- seems pretty basic theology to us
- but it was mind-stretchingly, head-messing-with, revolutionary then

John Baptist did what his name suggests

- he baptised people, queues and queues and queues of them and then Jesus came down to the river ...

I remember the first time I saw this in a film

- Jesus coming to the river to be baptised
no words, just clever camera work showing Jesus drawing near to the water and John's face as he recognised the One
- John's awe, John's reverence, John's delight, John's relief
as he realised that the One he had preached about and prepared for, was here ...

John, the person who had been doing all the baptising

- could now, at last, be baptised by Jesus
be cleansed and renewed and refreshed and have his calling confirmed
- at least, that's the way John was seeing it
Jesus, however has other ideas and invites John to baptise him

In the film I am referring to the actor playing John Baptist is superb

- managing to capture, without words, John's questioning and confusion
then he begins to argue, then to plead
that it should be the other way around, that he is not worthy
- and then John's resignation and reluctance
which turns to acceptance and finally joy at being part of this special moment in time
- John Baptist's calling is confirmed not by being baptised by Jesus
rather by baptising Jesus
- and in this moment in the river Jesus becomes something more too:
the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One
- it was certainly not what John, or anyone else for that matter, had expected
but it was the only way for the Son of God to begin to fulfil his mission

Remember John preached a baptism of repentance

- John baptised people who were sorry for their sins
people who were looking to get their lives on track
- Jesus was without sin
yet it seems he did need to be baptised by John to get his life on track

It seems to me Jesus' baptism can be seen as four things:

the moment of decision, the moment of identification,
the moment of approval, the moment of equipment

Let me explain:

The 'Moment of Decision'

- for thirty years Jesus had stayed in Nazareth faithfully doing his day's work
yet he must have been aware that this was not his destiny
- that the time for him to go out was coming
and so Jesus waited and watched for a sign
- the emergence of John Baptist was that sign
Jesus knew that the moment of decision had come
- Nazareth was peaceful, home was sweet
but Jesus answered the summons and the challenge of God

The 'Moment of Identification'

- Jesus had no sin to repent from
his baptism was an act of identification with those sinners he had come to save
- the preaching of John Baptist had stirred a movement of people back to God
Jesus identified himself with this Godward movement
- Jesus identified with those people who were seeking a way back to God
Jesus identified himself with us
experienced the life of an ordinary person like you and me

The 'Moment of Approval'

- no-one sets off lightly from home on an unknown way
Jesus felt this was the way God was calling him to go
but he needed confirmation, God's seal of approval
- at the time of John Baptist and Jesus
most people were not used to God talking to them in any clear, obvious manner
and they certainly were not used to hearing the voice of God
- in the rare times God had spoken recently
people said it was so distant they only heard the echo
but when Jesus was baptised, the voice of God was heard directly
- at baptism Jesus submitted his future path to God
and that course of action was unmistakably approved

The 'Moment of Equipment'

- the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus, as a dove
the dove is the symbol of gentleness
- John Baptist's message had been anything but gentle:
with images like an axe laid to the root of the tree, terrible sifting, consuming fire
- but from the very beginning Jesus' mission is entwined with gentleness
for sure Jesus has power, and it is the power of love
- yes Jesus will indeed conquer and overcome all enemies
however it will be a triumph of love

During Advent, before Christmas, we held up John Baptist as a sign for us to get ready

- now, after Christmas, we see that John Baptist is also a sign for Jesus
the sign that his mission is to begin
- in today's gospel we are, like Jesus, given a sign for life after Christmas
the way we are to follow
the hope and promise, the blessing of the Spirit that awaits us
- in Jesus God builds the message that he is with us indeed
and as one of us God shows us what his love means

Names, Soap, Baptism

- John got a new name because of what he did: John Baptist
Jesus got a new name too because of what John did: Jesus Christ
- I wonder what name your baptism gives you?

[hold up soap]

- we need to wash every day
we remind ourselves of John Baptist's call to confession and repentance
a reminder to continue the work of cleansing
- cleaning the *inside* of our heads and hearts
in order to be filled anew with God's love and God's Spirit

To draw all this to some kind of conclusion to be going on with
- here is Joy Cowley's reflection on Jesus' baptism by John

DOWN BY THE LAKE

*There was a crowd of us down by the lake.
Kowhai petals glowed yellow in the shallows
but the snow on Ruapehu said the water was cold.
Not that it mattered. Just in and out, it was,
with John's voice large over the scene,
and the young folk singing and playing guitars.
Baptism for the forgiveness of sins?
Yeah, right, we thought. A bit of a lark.
But we came out feeling amazing, skin so alive
we could only laugh and gasp and believe
maybe there was something in it, after all.*

*Then he walked down from the road,
and the music dribbled away to silence.
Heads turned, eyes on him, eyes on John.
Why did Jesus want to be baptised?
Wouldn't it have been more to the point
if he was baptising the rest of us?
But baptism was what he wanted
so John led him over the pumice sand
and into the water, and we watched.
He went in without fuss or flinching,
his gaze fixed on something far away.
His eyes remained wide open
and he went under, lying on his back,
as still as someone newly drowned.
Then just as calmly, up he came,
the water falling off his hair in diamonds
and suddenly the sun was so bright
that it hurt our eyes to look at him.*

*Later, I had to ask John, "Why?"
And John said, "Don't you know?
Didn't you feel the change in the air?
He didn't do it for himself.
He did it for the rest of us." [“Down by the Lake”, in *Come and See*, p.18]*

[pause]

Now I invite you to pray with me a prayer for this day: [on PP slide]
*Almighty God,
you anointed Jesus at his baptism with the Holy Spirit,
and revealed him as your beloved Son;
grant that we who are baptised into his name
may give up our lives to your service,
and be found worthy of our calling;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*