

## Second Sunday After the Epiphany

Luke 3:15,16,21,22

### The Baptism of John and Jesus

John the Baptist burst on the scene in AD27 after four hundred years of prophetic silence. He stirred Israel to its roots with his summons to repentance and baptism. Hitherto baptism had been restricted to Gentile converts to Judaism and now he was treating the chosen people as mere Gentiles. No wonder the religious authorities were outraged. However, his call resonated with the longing of the human heart for a fresh start and many thronged to the Jordan to be baptised by him.

John linked three strands from the O.T. prophets in his understanding of baptism. Ezekiel had combined two of them viz. water and Spirit. (Ezek 36:25-27). John was under no illusion that water could convey forgiveness of sins. He saw washing with water as a preparatory rite, looking forward to the great cleansing and gift of the Spirit in the future. To these twin themes of water and Spirit, John adds a third viz. fire a symbol of both judgement and cleansing as in the prophet Malachi (Mal 3:2,3; 4:1)

As the waters of the Jordan closed over their heads it was symbolic of cleansing and repentance. Accordingly, they would not have to experience the awesome reality of judgement on the Day of Judgement. In short, John's baptism was one of repentance. No pedigree or good deeds would suffice in its place, and no one was too bad to be excluded. Above all it was a preparatory rite. It pointed forward to Jesus. He would cleanse the conscience and bring forgiveness of sins which John's baptism pointed to but could not offer.

Imagine John's consternation when Jesus presented himself for baptism "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied 'Let it be so now... to fulfil all righteousness.'" (Matt 3:14,15). Jesus, in the words of Michael Green was "standing proxy for sinful people... a dummy run for Calvary". In the later words of Jesus, "I have a baptism to undergo" (Lk 12:50) he refers to the cross as his baptism, where he bore our sins as our substitute.

The baptism of Jesus was symbolic of at least three things viz.

- i. Anointing of the Spirit  
Henceforth the Holy Spirit would not be restricted to certain people for certain times and tasks as in the O.T. but given in full measure at Pentecost.
- ii. Assurance of Sonship  
Jesus was Son of God by nature, we by grace. He is the authentic Son, we are children of God by adoption. However, we can enjoy the same intimacy with God the Father through faith in Jesus.
- iii. The Path of Servanthood  
The voice from heaven is a composite one comprising of two verses: "You are my Son" (Psalm 2:7) indicating the intimacy of Kingship, and "Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight" (Is 42:1) the first of Isaiah's servant songs culminating in Isaiah 53.

This should give us pause. All too often our faith is triumphalistic. We want blessings now, healings now, spiritual gifts now. But these are the fruit of a prior relationship with Jesus "who learned obedience from what he suffered" (Heb 5:8) and "for the joy that was set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame" (Heb 12:2) for our sakes. This then is the essence of Jesus' baptism by John, a prelude to the cross ensuring that we receive forgiveness through him experiencing judgement on our behalf.

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