

Jesus' baptism – salvation offered for all

Psalm 29
Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: 'I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.'

Mt 3:13-17

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' Then he consented. And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Billy Graham tells a story about an Arctic explorer who, many years ago, started on an expedition to the North Pole. After 2 years there he wrote a message and tied to a carrier pigeon that he had with him. He wanted to send it back to his wife in Norway, a couple of thousand miles away to let her know that all was ok. He held up the freezing little bird in his hand, and it took off, circled a few times and then went on its long journey. Eventually it arrived at the house of the explorer where his wife was. She then knew that all was well with her husband. In the same way, the coming of the Spirit onto Jesus at his baptism shows us that we can be assured that Jesus is who he says he is – that he is the saviour of the world and that salvation is for all.

So if you take a step back and put yourself in the shoes of John the Baptist, we can imagine his confusion when Jesus comes to him to be baptised. When Jesus comes to John to be baptised, John is well aware of who he is. The Gospel of John has him saying 'there is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world'. As Jesus comes to be baptised, John, quite understandably, says to him that Jesus should be the one baptising him, not the other way around.

The point which John the Baptist raises is one which I think we would all ask if we were in his position. Remember that the gospels say that John preached a baptism of 'repentance for the forgiveness of sins'. It was for those who recognised that their own way of life wasn't working and who wanted to turn their lives around and make a public proclamation that they want to receive forgiveness for the way they had been living.

So it's quite understandable that John is confused and isn't really sure what to do when Jesus comes to him to be baptised.

It begs the question of what is going through Jesus' mind when he asks John to baptise him. The first thing is that Jesus' response to John is the way he responded to everyone who had a genuine question – with grace and understanding. Jesus sees John's confusion and says "Let it be so now . . ." – Jesus agrees with John that he doesn't need to be baptised as a sinner needing forgiveness. But he adds that the reason it needs to be done is because Jesus knows that he needs to undergo this baptism to fulfill the plan that God has.

Why? Because God's plan of salvation requires that a sinless Substitute identify with the sins of the people he came to save. When Jesus says that his own baptism is to "fulfill all righteousness", he is saying that it is a foreshadow of the 'baptism' that he was to receive later in death which did fulfil all righteousness, when he died in our place on the cross.

St Paul writes elsewhere that Jesus became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God, so that we can live again, live life as it is meant to be lived, that with the Holy Spirit in us, we can have the power, not to do what we want, but to live as we ought.

So, in a sense, Jesus' baptism is showing the world that he has come to take our place in death. He has come to take on our sin, all the things we have done wrong, all the wrong attitudes of our heart, all those things that we don't even want to tell those closest to us, our deepest secrets. He's taking them all and dealing with them. This is the very reason that Jesus came – he came to die.

Jesus' baptism also marks the formal beginning of his public ministry. It is from here that he goes into the wilderness and then comes back and proclaims that the Spirit of the Lord is upon him to preach good news to the poor and release for the captives. And then begins his 3 year ministry of doing good, proclaiming the good news about himself, getting into trouble and eventually paying for it with his life and then on that fabulous Easter morning, the greatest moment of all, his defeat of death itself by rising from the dead.

As I was taking a walk during the week, a thought came to mind that Jesus' baptism reminds me of the absolute necessity that I have for the Spirit to guide my life. If I want to be a follower of Christ, I can't do it without the same Spirit who came down onto Jesus at his baptism. I need that same Spirit to guide, to teach and to direct how I am to live because I don't have much of an idea on my own.

On my own I could decide to live a life based on what I think are Christian values and decide that I want to be good to people, but that is not the same as living with the guidance of the Spirit. Jesus said the Spirit would guide us into all truth.

Every morning I have to ask God to fill me with his Spirit for that day, to help me to do his will and not my own, because not only do I not know how to live on my own, but I don't have the resources within me to live the life I want to live. It simply isn't there. As the saying goes, I am like a ship without a rudder.

I can do things which I think might be good, but how do I know if I have nothing to guide me. I can create my own meanings and make up my own morals but it doesn't change my heart. God says he will write his laws on our hearts. That's what I need, and that's what the world needs.

When we live in a world where people blow themselves up for a cause, where the current British Prime Minister is probably going to lose the next election because he comes across as too dull and isn't as charismatic as his opponent, where we have never been richer but still we are told every day that having the next toy will make us happy, where advertising is actually designed to create unhappiness in us by telling us that we won't be satisfied until we have that next thing, and where, even worse, we fall for it time after time. In a world like this we need a guiding power because it is so obvious that our way of living is not working. Never has and never will.

I've just finished a book by Philip Yancey called 'Reaching for the Invisible God' in which he says the following about the state of the world, "we master the atom and nearly obliterate ourselves. We learn the secrets of life only to develop techniques to destroy the unborn and the ageing. We unlock the genetic code and open a Pandora's box of ethics. We tame the Great Plains with agriculture and cause dust bowls, harvest rainforests and create floods, harness internal combustion and melt the icecaps. We link the world on the internet only to find that the most downloaded items are pornographic".

We are made in the image of God and do great things but in almost every instance it is tainted by our human nature. We can't do the work of God without the Spirit of God.

Jesus is the one who guides us. He did it when he lived on earth and His Spirit does it now in us. The voice that Jesus heard at his baptism shows that God approved of Jesus' baptism (read 3:16,17). Both visibly (by the Holy Spirit appearing like a dove) and audibly (through the heavenly voice), God designated Jesus as his Chosen One and affirmed his decision to be baptised by John--because it foreshadowed what he would do on the cross.

And it's when the same Spirit that came down onto Jesus guides us, that we start to live a life guided by God, where our values change, where we see God doing things in our lives that we could never have done ourselves. And it's with the Spirit that our heart changes.

This happened to Peter in the Acts passage. Peter can now say from his heart that he truly understands that God shows no partiality, because just before that he had to be convinced that salvation was now open to anyone and not just his own people.

And that is how we will live as well when guided by the Spirit. With the Spirit in me I realise that no one is beyond

the love of God – not even me. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, humility and self-control. We will slowly begin to develop these characteristics. We will treat the person we don't like very much with the same dignity and respect that we would treat those closest to us.

Peter applies this character quality (God not showing favouritism) to God's dealing with people from every nation. Peter says that people in every ethnic grouping who fear God and do right are acceptable and welcome to him.

It's also interesting that Isaiah presents the servant of the Lord as having a ministry that extends to all nations (Is 42:6).

Bryan Patterson's column called Faithworks in the Sunday Herald Sun last week made the same sort of point by pointing out that everyone in the world is related in some way.

We are all at least 40th cousins. Everyone alive is likely to be related at least remotely to Mohammed, Kevin Rudd, Osama bin Laden, Mother Teresa and Adolf Hitler. The terrorist who assassinated Benazir Bhutto was related to her. Every Palestinian suicide bomber has Jews in his past. Every Ku Klux Klanner has African roots.

It's easy to forget the ultimate reality - that we are all brothers and sisters. Neocapitalism, with its stress on independence, contempt for weakness and adulation of material success has created a sick society. The rich have withdrawn into gated communities, the middle class is frightened and the poor are poorer still.

We can forget that each of us was created for a specific purpose. We can look at what the world considers beauty and worth, and decide we just don't measure up. But God's idea of worth and beauty is different from what the world has in mind.

If we look at each other with God's eyes we will realise we are all precious, unique and gifted. We are brothers and sisters on a journey.

And seeing each other with God's eyes we see that salvation is for all – that Jesus dies for all. There is a saying that says the ground is level at the foot of the cross. No one is beyond the reach of God's Spirit. That is a comfort to anyone and everyone in the world – those who are racially and culturally despised, be they Muslims in a Western culture, be they asylum seekers demonised just for trying to seek a better life, be they people in prison who have a sense of despair and hopelessness about their lives, be it the insecure teenager who feels different amongst all his friends, be it the single mother struggling to raise her young kids.

The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Jesus walked his talk, and he gives us the Spirit to walk his talk. This is salvation offered for all – a free gift from the God of the universe.

by Nils von Kalm
13 January 2008