

A Narrative Sermon on the Baptism of Jesus - Epiphany 2, 9 Jan 11

Isaiah 42:1–9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34–43; Matthew 3:13–17

PREAMBLE

This is a narrative sermon. I invite us into a story to meet an imaginary man named Simon. So I'm imagining he's in the crowd at Jesus' baptism. I've attempted to base the descriptions of what went through Simon's eyes on the Scriptures or historical research. But as with any creative work there is poetic license to help us get the mood, movement and message of the story.

PRAYER Let us pray:

Let me introduce myself: my name is Simon and I later decided to follow this man I'm about to tell you about. A man I originally thought to be a good prophet but the more time I spent with Him I realised was the Son of God. I witnessed some extraordinary things in Jesus and not surprisingly supernatural actions and results when He prayed, laid hands on people or taught. He was a good teacher but much more than that. But today let me tell you about the time He went down to the Jordan River.

John was baptising in the region and like many I came to see and hear what it was all about. Crowds of people had flocked to hear John and they were not just onlookers so I had a raised level of curiosity. I could see that John had a deep conviction about his calling to prepare the people to receive the Messiah. He seemed to know that those who were to become followers of the Christ must have no sense of sin upon their conscience. John was preparing people by using a ceremony of initiation that was our familiar Jewish rite of immersion in water used when people converted to our Jewish religion.

We somehow knew this meant that John was establishing a new order. I, Simon, called it at first an Israel within Israel, composed of men and women who had repented of their sins and were this ready to uphold the cause when the time came.

John was uncompromising in telling us to repent. The Aramaic word John was using for 'repent' is literally 'be converted', or more loosely 'turn around and go back for there is no safety in the course you are now pursuing.'

And as John stood there with people from Jerusalem and all of Judea and all the Jordan district coming and believing his message and being baptised, I watched and thought to myself 'he's like Elijah'. His appearance was like what I had heard Elijah's was which raised our expectation of the Messiah coming soon.

John seemed to know he was a forerunner.

He spoke with conviction and confidence obviously knowing the importance of his message. As I watched the people listen and respond they often became uncomfortable, upset and even annoyed at times. We lived in such times of unrest and hope that our political oppressors would be overthrown that John's appearance, his rough vigour and the force of his language had the impact of announcing a great change.

And over and over I saw, as people struggled with their conscience and made a decision to confess and stepped up to John to be baptised, afterwards a peace showed in them. And inevitably they would come up out of the water smiling, as if a burden had been lifted. The other thing I noticed was that the people got baptised. It wasn't something done to them rather it was something they did. It flowed from a choice made deep within each one. A life changing choice that had them embrace this physical symbolic action of giving up all the old in the water and coming up clean and committed to a new way. It seemed to be a way they professed to be fit and proper members of a new order. And John seemed to wait to be convinced of the sincerity of those he was admitting to the new order.

John came across with a fiery temper. He couldn't stand hypocrisy. You should have heard what he called the Pharisees and Sadducees. Do you know what he called them?

After our deadliest snakes! He was tough on the religious leaders. It didn't matter that they had a father in Abraham, their life was the only evidence he would accept as evidence of repentance and he told them that unless they produce good fruit they would be like a tree that is chopped down and thrown into the fire.

Then one day, by this river where we gathered, came a man that stood out to me and who I later came to know as my Lord, my teacher, and as The Christ.

This day when He came there was nothing attractive in His appearance, nothing to make Him stand out from other men, yet as He awaited His turn quietly and walked down to John with no hesitation at all I noticed John hesitate.

John was so sure of his task that he exuded certainty. His reaction intrigued me and I decided to move closer to see why this man had had such an effect.

As I repositioned myself I could see that John was shaking his head and seemed to be saying 'no'. Then I caught what he was saying: "I need to be baptised by You and do You come to me?" John must know Him, I thought, or known of Him. But John wasn't one to be impressed by important people so that got me more interested.

The man, whom I later came to know was named Jesus clearly had no sins to confess like the rest of us. This Jesus said something along the lines of 'Come on do it, for this is how we should fulfil our duty to God – that doing this fulfils all righteousness'.

His answer had an impact on John and he gave in and moved with this man out into the deeper section of the river, where it also naturally widens.

The brown water was flowing gently by with some little eddies forming as John pushed Jesus fully under the water. Jesus seemed to linger under it for a while fully immersed. Some of his long hair was floating out behind Him in the current.

Then it was like time slowed right down.

John was usually pretty rough when he immersed people in the river but it was like he pulled his hands away quickly as if there was something sacred happening.

And he was right! I was riveted to the spot because as this man, Jesus, rose from the water, the heavens opened. These little words say so much. When this happened it was like pure glorious light poured from the skies giving the impression of endless glorious light behind that went on and on. It was far brighter than the light of the sun at noonday.

Oh so glorious!

Then something was moving through the open heaven. I couldn't make out its form at first; it was sort of just movement without form really. Then as it alighted upon Jesus it looked like a dove, a Holy dove. I could barely move. I didn't dare breathe – there was such a sense of presence and power.

Awesome!

Amazing!

Awe inspiring!

And in that unearthly scene – a voice boomed out – unmistakable and clear, communicating authority. Like with so much authority in it that no one or nothing could argue with it. A voice I could imagine creating what it spoke.

And as clear as day the words were heard and they were for this man Jesus. *"This is My Son, whom I love. With Him I am well pleased."* (Mt 3:17)

"My Beloved, in Him is My delight".

I knew that these words claimed Jesus as unique. This man was no ordinary man standing there in the water and as He stood there it was like He knew it too – that He was the Messiah – the One who would bear upon Himself the salvation of firstly His own people and then of all the sinful human race.

Everything still felt frozen in time – it was as if time didn't exist and that we were onlookers in a most significant historic event.

What a holy moment!

The very air felt charged with an invisible energy and there was a blanket of thickness – invisible once again and yet tangible. It was a thickness of love. As the voice of the Father spoke from heaven about His Beloved, the presence of love was there – around us in the fact of its presence – but somehow fully on, in and with Jesus.

But there was a holy fear of the Lord present in the very atmosphere. I thought of the Psalm that says "*The ... God of glory thunders over the mighty waters. The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is majestic. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars,*" (Ps 29: 3-5)

Oh how precious a moment of revelation from heaven, of proclamation really, and of anointing. The dove was clearly anointing Jesus with a power and an energy that was distinctly supernatural.

Now - from the perspective of hindsight I, Simon, can tell you that at the time of His baptism with John, Jesus of Nazareth was anointed with the Holy Spirit and power and He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil. (Acts 10:38) None have to stay oppressed anymore. Jesus won their freedom. That is something we have gained.

God was indeed with Jesus and after He was killed in Jerusalem God raised Him from the dead on the third day. I, and in fact many others, witness to not only seeing Him but also to eating and drinking with him. (Acts 10:39-41)

Before He left us, Jesus commanded us to preach to everyone this good news of what He had done and to testify that He is the one God has appointed as judge of the living and the dead. (Acts 10:42)

In fact all the prophets testify about Him that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name. (Acts 10:43)

This is Good News!

And I have come to realise that God does not show favouritism but accepts everyone from every nation: everyone who fears Him and does what is right. (Acts 10:34-35)

How fantastic it is to know that we are all accepted. All accepted. He makes sure that a bruised reed is not broken (Isa 42:3). And just as the Father walked with Jesus, Jesus now takes hold of our hands and keeps us.

I can tell you, dear listener, after being at THAT BAPTISM that there is a power in baptism. For Jesus, fulfilled the call of righteousness that day in the river and Jesus fulfilled the Divine Exchange of paying for our sins on Calvary enabling us to die to sin and be born anew, cleansed, forgiven and free.

He released a power for reconciliation and restoration. And I have learnt that we too can have the same anointing from the Holy Spirit of power and love as Jesus had enabling us to follow in His footsteps to bring His light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, to set the captives free and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness. (Isa 42: 6b-7).

Yes, my friends it was a privilege to be there on THAT day but it is an even greater privilege to walk in the freedom and power of the same Spirit that anointed Jesus that day and now is with us. The Holy Spirit who enables us to enjoy the fruit of love, joy and peace. The same Spirit who helps us to *worship the Lord in the splendour of His holiness and to "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due to His name"* (Ps 29:2).

Thank you for sharing in my part of the story and my passion this morning.
Simon

May we pray: