

The Baptism of Jesus

Isaiah 43:1–7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14–17; Luke 3:15–22

In my post Christmas reading I am enjoying the first volume of Robert Lacey's *Great Tales from English History*. I enjoy reading history anyway, but Lacey has an engaging way of bringing it to life, by introducing the reader to the people and characters who made history. He gives us their stories.

Luke too is a story teller. He gives us the human story as he records the events surrounding the life and ministry of Jesus. Luke begins at the beginning, setting the scene, introducing us to all sorts of characters from Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, to shepherds and angels, Simeon and Anna, and, of course John the Baptist. Luke is interested in people and human nature – our greatness and glory, complexity and mystery, weakness and wounding, our moments of both poetry and mundane prose.

Luke crafts a story about how the human and the divine are interwoven, enmeshed, bound together, and this is the context in which we meet Jesus.

Today we come to the event of Jesus being baptised by John. What does Luke tell us about this?

At first glance Luke has more to say about John than Jesus. Our reading opens with people questioning and wondering if, in fact, John was the long awaited Messiah, but John makes it very clear that he is not. John knows who he is and what his vocation is and he does not assume a role or persona that does not belong to him. John's work is to prepare the way for another, to direct people to the Messiah, and he does this consistently, faithfully and with great humility.

Luke also gives us an insight into John's courage and audacity – John was a man who spoke the truth no matter who it offended. He was one who challenged sinfulness and called people to repentance - the ultimate "tell it like it is" man.

Incidentally, we also have at this point in the text, a delightful comment from Luke – a little editorial if you like. As Luke reports that John had spoken out against Herod for his immoral marriage, we also hear Luke’s judgement of Herod, as he tells us that, along with all the other sinful and evil things he has done, Herod tops it all off by putting John in prison. The New Living Translation reads: *So Herod put John in prison, adding this sin to his many others.* It’s a great little side comment from Luke.

Robert Lacey, in his *Great Tales from English History* writes: “all men and women have heroism inside them – along with generous and fascinating measures of incompetence, apathy, evil and lust.”¹

Herod is unable to hear the unpleasant truth about himself and so moves to silence John. Instead of choosing the path of true greatness, he chooses the path of weakness and fear. Luke has many such stories to tell as his tale unfolds.

And so, to the baptism of Jesus. Why was Jesus being baptised? Luke does not tell us in so many words.

For John, baptism was a sign of preparation for the coming judgement of God. It was a ritual of cleansing and purification, a sign of repentance and turning to God - not unlike baptism in the Church today.

Why then, should Jesus, who was without sin, need to be baptised?

Perhaps for Luke, Jesus’ baptism demonstrates a deep, intimate identification with the human condition. Jesus stands in our shoes, where we would stand in need of the grace and mercy of God, a place of brokenness and vulnerability.

Perhaps, in his baptism, Jesus honours John’s faithfulness in his role of prophet and preparer of the way. In this way the baptism of Jesus, by John, symbolically marks the ending of one ministry and the beginning of the new.

¹ Lacey, R. *Great Tales from English History: Cheddar Man to the Peasant’s Revolt: C7150 BC – AD 1381*

Little, Brown 2003 p xvii of the Introduction.

For Luke, Jesus' baptism is also a very public anointing of the Holy Spirit – the spirit of fire and power, to which John alludes, when he speaks of the baptism he cannot give but can come only from the Messiah.

It is interesting though, that the form the Spirit takes as it descends upon Jesus is not that of fire but of a dove, a sign of peace and God's grace. I wonder what John thought of that.

The work of the Spirit, of course is very important to Luke. It is one of the main themes of his writing through the gospel and particularly in the book of Acts. I suspect that for Luke, the baptism of Jesus is more about the anointing of the Holy Spirit than the immersion in water.

We cannot ponder the baptism of Jesus without reflecting upon our own baptism and what that means for us. Christian baptism is a sacrament of grace, a sign of new birth, new life made possible through Christ. It marks the commitment to live a life of faith, humility, prayer and service to God; a life of love, of thanksgiving, lived in communion with God's people.

However in baptism, we also enter a life of sacrifice, vulnerability, and a life that puts us at odds with the powers and persuasions of the world, the pull of the crowd.

John was not warmly embraced for living a prophetic, counter cultural life. He was imprisoned and finally executed for his faithful witness to God. As we follow the life and ministry of Jesus, and that of the early church in Acts, we soon discover that John's was not a rare experience. A life of faith means we are baptised not only into the life of Christ but the risen life – the life that comes through death. And so we live both the suffering and the joy of Christ, the darkness and the light of discipleship.

We don't like to think about that, we are often surprised when suffering occurs in our life, or when we find it so difficult to go against the flow and live a life that runs counter to the philosophies and fads of the day. And yet that is what we are called to do – to speak the truth in love, even when no one wants to hear it; to resist evil and destructive behaviour, to stand against injustice and

greed, to identify ourselves with the outcast and the lost not the comfortable and successful; and to choose the courageous, heroic way in the face of unpopularity and scorn.

How hard this is to hear and accept. It is certainly not what parents who bring their children for baptism want to hear, and it is something we ourselves, at times, shy away from, or choose to become deaf to, in the choices we make about how we live our lives and how we witness to Christ in the world; and yet, is fundamental to our vocation as disciples of Christ.

When we make a commitment to a life of faith, we have no idea how that life will pan out, what challenges and hardships we may face, what blessings and opportunities may come our way, where God will lead us on our pilgrimage through life. And it is probably just as well, for perhaps, if we had known what the journey would entail, many of us would not have set off in the first place.

Baptism is a sacrament of the grace of God. It has no meaning if we do not recognise the need for grace in the first place. Light has no power if we have no experience of the darkness, joy has no delight if we never know the pain of suffering, being welcomed home means nothing if we have never felt abandoned or alone. It is death that helps to give meaning and purpose to life.

Our baptism, in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, reminds us that first and foremost, we are held in God's grace and love, and only through this grace are we able to live a life of faith, courage, holiness, sacrifice and true joy. In Christ we can make the hard decisions, step out in faith, and if need be, stand where no one else dares to stand, because God is with us.

We have a year of change and transition ahead of us, and that can be a frightening and worrying thing. But it will only remain frightening and worrying if we try to endure it in our own strength. We may not be able to envisage the future at the moment, but God is already there, waiting to welcome us.

May the power and peace of the Spirit be with us as we embrace the wonderful story God is writing for us.

The Lord be with you.