

Sermon Baptism of our Lord (1st Sunday after Epiphany), Yr. B @ St Johns – 10/1/21
“Jesus was Baptised for us” [Mark 1:4-11]
- Pastor André Meyer

Pray: Heavenly Father, open our hearts and minds to hear your words of truth, in Christ, Amen.

Why does baptism mean so much to us? Baptism is a rite that's been around a long time. For many years, since Old Testament times, Jews have had their ceremonial and ritual washings (baptisms) and cleansings. They eventually also baptised Gentiles who wanted to become Jews: purifying them and washing away the uncleanness of the Gentile world, its godless culture and unbelief. We remember also that Namaan was told to wash seven times in the Jordan River to be purified of his skin disease (2 Kgs. 5:10). There were baptisms (washings) at the pool of Siloam, where an angel stirred the waters, and, also within the Qumran community. And so baptism was nothing new for John the Baptist. The essential ingredient of baptism is water – for water washes. Baptism also signifies action – either from the person being baptised, or from God, *or both*, and, baptism is literally a washing, a sprinkling or immersion in water. Baptism is understood as a way of cleansing. Practically speaking, if you wash up, take a shower or bathe, it's generally because you're not clean to begin with. So, baptism has an aspect of getting rid of dirt to make someone clean – literally or metaphorically.

Spiritually speaking, baptism also has an aspect of getting rid of that which is not holy or clean in God's sight, namely, sin, offenses against God which make us unholy. Baptism makes us holy and new in God's sight. God teaches us in the Old Testament that what is unholy cannot survive long in the presence of His holiness, for God's holiness and glory destroys what is unclean or impure. Hence the reason for the establishment of sacrifices at Mt Sinai to pay for the sins of the people.

Baptism is also a kind of preparation. We shower and take a bath because of what we've got planned afterwards – we're going to put on clean clothes and go out to a party or to church to worship, or, even to go to bed to sleep. We might liken baptism to taking off our old and dirty clothes (rags) and putting on Christ and His righteousness (Gal. 3:27). Baptism also carries with it a change of status – not only from unclean to clean, but also from outside to inside – from being outside of God's family, to becoming part of God's family. As a result, our status before God and others has changed. Baptism means that we know *to whom* we ultimately belong – we are no longer people of this world, but people of God's Kingdom. And, when we know *whose* we are, we are able to discern more clearly *who* we are, and our purpose then in this world.

As God's children through baptism, we now know for certain and for *all time*, *who* we are and *whose* we are. Why? Because *we or the Church* say or declare it to be so? No. Because God does. Once we are sure about that, we can live and love and

serve and celebrate, *and*, even die, safe in the arms of a loving God, in the arms of our Heavenly Father – which is good news indeed.

Today we hear Mark's account of John the Baptist coming as God's prophet, calling people to faith, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins and baptising people in the desert (Mk. 1:4-11). Mark tells us that all the people of the Judean countryside and Jerusalem went to John to be baptised in the Jordan River (v.5). Perhaps not everyone, but a large number heeded John's call to repentance and forgiveness of their sins before God.

Mark's language hints at Israel's baptism when all of God's people passed through the waters of Red Sea and were saved from the Egyptians (1 Cor. 10:1-2). It also calls to mind Joshua leading the Israelites through the waters of the Jordan River to enter into the Promised Land of Canaan. God Himself miraculously made a way for them, once again, through the waters. Afterwards, they left a memorial of twelve stones taken from the River, one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel (Josh. 4). Though the Jordan is not a mighty flowing river, in fact, in parts it's merely a muddy creek, the Jordan River is a place where the LORD gathers His people and reveals Himself and His gracious will for them. The Jordan signifies a threshold, of leaving behind the old and being brought into the new; new lands, with a new hope and new future.

And yet, John, the one dressed as Elijah, in camel's hair and a leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey (2 Kings 1:8), realises that the baptism he's proclaiming, is only a lesser baptism compared to the baptism that the One greater than he will soon bring. If all Judea comes to John's baptism of repentance, *who* will come for the Baptism of the Holy Spirit?! As important as John is, fulfilling God's Old Testament promises, they pale into comparison to what God will do next.

At some point Jesus appeared, and we hear that He is simply baptised by John. But Jesus' baptism is different from all the others John conducted. Jesus was the only one among all the multitudes who came to John who didn't need the forgiveness of sins. Jesus is the only one who ever lived who didn't need to repent.

Afterwards as Jesus rises out of the water, Mark uses the first of his forty-one uses of the word '*immediately*'. "*Immediately He saw heaven being torn open...*" (v.10). Heaven is torn open and the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus like a dove. The word 'torn' is the same used at the end of Mark's Gospel for the tearing of the Temple curtain and for the splitting of the rocks at Jesus' death. All of a sudden, in the seemingly ordinary event of baptism, God displayed the great power that Jesus brings with Him, and earth is allowed a glimpse of heaven by God. Heaven is now opened to all, for Christ brings God's power for our salvation. If you like, Jesus powerfully tore open heaven for us!

Eyes are opened and begin to see the coming of salvation through Christ, the Lord. As the Magi visited the child bringing costly gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, now Christ visits all people, bringing the greatest gift of all: Himself.

Then, a voice came from heaven: *"You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"* (v.11). The voice that allowed the heavens to be opened, the voice at Creation itself, now uses that torn opening to proclaim His pleasure in His only Son. Our God, Father, Son and Spirit are now on display speaking to human hearts and senses. As the Spirit and the Son were revealed to human eyes, so the voice is real to human ears.

And Jesus stands at the very *centre* of it all. He is the Son of God, and His heavenly Father anoints Him with the Holy Spirit. In the midst of something ordinary, the one true God reveals Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Heavenly realities are made known to human beings. Jesus is revealed as the Son of God, sent by the Father, as promised, who would make possible our rescue and salvation, and was declared by the Father as a pleasing sacrifice for our sins!

Jesus' baptism marks the beginning of His ministry of salvation. He shows us the *Way into* God's Kingdom. Though He was sinless, in His baptism, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness for us (Mt. 3:14–15). In His baptism He identifies with sinners, and, was anointed to bring God's good news. He was baptised as the One who would take all sins upon Himself, and pave the road to salvation for all.

Though there was no sin of His own that needed forgiving, as He was washed by John, Jesus took on the sin and guilt of the whole world. He allowed Himself to be counted among sinners – becoming one with us and taking hold of our sin to carry it to the cross and the grave. At His birth, God was joined with our flesh and blood so that He could be with us. And, in His baptism, Jesus voluntarily joins Himself to our sin so that He can overcome it for us.

The sin, guilt and shame that closed heaven to us sinners was being lifted onto the only One who could bear its load and defeat its power and hold over humanity. The wall and divide of sin that cut us off from God begins to be ripped apart as the heavens are torn, and as Jesus starts carrying our heavy burden, accepting our sin as His own.

When Jesus dies a sinner's death, in our place, the curtain in the Temple is torn asunder, giving humanity a new access to God. The holiness of God's glory and presence, kept separate from us because of sin, is now unleashed and available to all. And, when you and I were baptised, we received the costly blessing He has won on our behalf. We were washed clean by Jesus' blood and were given a place in God's eternal family. When Jesus was baptised, He took upon Himself our sinful

state, that He could take it to the cross and deal with it forever – *once* for all! He bore God's judgement, in our place, so that we can receive God's mercy and grace.

In baptism, as St Paul teaches, God powerfully unites us with Christ and His death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3-5). It's a powerful means of God's Grace that we hardly deserve! In baptism God acts to show us just how much He loves us and wants us, and all people, to be His. God's saves us through water and the Word by connecting us to Jesus. In baptism, your heart becomes a home for Christ by the power of the Spirit. It means that Jesus lives in you and continues to do so by faith. And if we are part of Christ, we are forgiven and holy. And so, we can return to God's promises of mercy and grace in baptism and claim them again and again – whenever we need. That is why we love God – because He first loves us, and will continue to do so throughout our days; for Christ will never leave you or forsake you (Hebr. 13:5).

Finally, because of Jesus' faithfulness and work on our behalf, God the Father looks upon us through the waters of our baptism, and also declares *to us*: "*You are my son, you are my daughter, whom I love; with you I am well pleased. For, your sins are forgiven in Jesus' name, and you are, forever mine.*" Amen.