



JESUS IS BAPTISED

St Stephen's sermon

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Scripture: Matthew 3: 13-17

Also Includes:

Gen 1: 1-10, Exodus 30; 17-21, Acts 8: 36,
John 3:3



Jesus our Lord lowers himself to the depth of us failed human beings. He is the Beloved Son of the Living God. His baptism was unnecessary regarding the repentance from sin, nevertheless, Jesus shows us the importance of submitting to God's law, God's will for mankind

Sermon:

Good morning,

The Anglican Lectionary sites today as the day the church focuses on the baptism of Jesus. We have just heard in the gospel reading, that Jesus was baptized, not as a baby, but as an adult, as a sign that he was about to begin his work for God.

Last November, I had the amazing privilege of assisting with the adult baptism of Mel Crosbie, here at St Stephen's 10 am service.

An adult baptism, for me, is one of the most emotional events in my church life. It's that special time, when a person commits their life to God in a public display of obedience.

Baptism history: In Biblical Hebrew history, the first observance of water "baptism" is in Genesis 1:10

In the beginning, the creation, in its disordered state, was immersed in water, and it was through the operation of the Spirit brooding upon the waters, that He brought forth order out of chaos and created new life.

The rule of immersion originated at creation, in the birthing of the earth out of its submerged state under the water. When God gathered the waters together into seas, He caused the earth to be resurrected out of its watery grave, which in effect, was the 'womb' from which it came forth.

The Hebrew word used for 'gathered waters' in verse 10 is "mikveh". The mikveh waters were the womb of creation, from which He brought forth new life out of its former state of 'death'.

The earliest record of human water cleansing is found early in the old Testament in the book of Exodus 30: 17-21 in where we see Moses warning Aaron and his sons to wash their hands and feet before they come to the altar to minister and if they do not, they shall die. We also see in Leviticus 15 the rules on washing clean the whole body before serving in the tabernacle.

So, the immersion into living waters became a vitally important act when a person commits their life to God.

It can be any living water and at any time, as we see in the book of Acts 8: 36. *“As they travelled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?”*

The word baptism comes from the Hebrew "tevilah" and later the Greek word "baptismos", meaning "to be immersed" in water, and subsequently to the English word Baptise.

This immersion in water is carried out in a mikvah, which is a Hebrew word meaning “place of gathering of waters.” This gathered water had to be living water, water that was flowing or running.

This living water is symbolic of our spiritual cleansing, life, and rebirth that we have in Jesus.

Baptism then could be described as a physical act a person performs in order to symbolize a radical change of heart, a total commitment to Jesus Christ.

Quote from *myjewishlearning.com*

“Jewish tradition describes baptism as when the conversion candidate, places himself or herself, in a radically different physical environment—in water rather than air. This leaves the person floating—momentarily suspended without breathing—substituting the usual forward moving nature and purposeful stride with an aimlessness, a weightlessness, a detachment from the former environment. Individuality, passion, ego—all are submerged in the metamorphosis from the larval state of the present to a new existence.”

Baptism, therefore, according to the scriptures, requires the total submersion of the body in a pool of living water.

Water Symbolizes new birth

Submerging in a pool of water for the purpose of not of using the water’s physical cleansing properties but using the water to expressly symbolize a change-of-soul, is a statement that is deeply spiritual and

immensely compelling. No other symbolic act can so totally embrace a person as being submerged in water, which must touch and cover every lesion, every strand of hair, every birthmark. No other religious act is so weighted with meaning, as this one, which touches every aspect of life and publicly proclaims a total commitment to a new way of life as it swallows up the old, washes away the past, leaving only the future and so gives birth to the new, like a new-born child.

Submerging into waters over your head, you enter an environment in which you cannot breathe and cannot live for more than moments. It is the death of all that has gone before. As you emerge from the gagging waters into the clear air, you begin to breathe anew and live anew—as a baby struggling to be born.

If we take this graphic image a step further, we can sense that the baptismal pool is a spiritual womb. The human foetus is surrounded by water, cocooned in the mother's womb, then the time arrives, the mother's gathered waters break, and through God's miracle of birth, a new child emerges into a new world.

Therefore, the act of Baptism, is to be born again.

We are commanded by the scriptures to be born again, to wash away our former self and become a new child, to be born into a new world, and that world, is "The Kingdom of God".

John 3:3 Jesus replied, *"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*

The symbolism of baptism is both of washing and of new birth. It carries the idea that the old sinful nature is being washed clean, ready for a new start in serving God faithfully for the rest of our lives.

The baptism service also reminds us, how the people of Israel passed through the Red Sea as a sign that they were being reborn as the people of God, freed from slavery to serve God in their new land.

Baptism then signifies death as well as rebirth.

Now the big question from today's reading.

If baptism is the act of both the removal of sin, and of the old sinful life being replaced by a new life for God.

Why did Jesus, who was sinless, need to be baptised? or did he need to be baptised?

If the reason of Baptism is that it signifies death and rebirth, then we have a problem with both those ideas, for as far as Jesus is concerned, he didn't need to do it for either reason.

So why did he do it?

Well, because for Jesus, there was a reason in which he believed that he needed to do it.

But first let's think about why he didn't need to be baptized.

Why he didn't need to be baptized.

John was in no doubt about what should and shouldn't be happening.

Look at Matthew 3:14: John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" John understood Jesus' importance in the plan of things. He'd said a few verses earlier that Jesus was the promised Messiah; whose sandals John wasn't even worthy to carry.

But it wasn't just that. More importantly, baptism signifies being washed clean from sin, and Jesus had never actually sinned.

The reason John was baptizing people was to purify them before the Messiah came. So, they'd be ready.

Now up to this moment, John's message has been one of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Earlier, in the verse 7, prior to today's readings, we see John warning people to flee from the wrath that's coming, then in the next verse, we

see as God's anointed King, Jesus Christ, come to John.

And in the final words we have recorded from John's lips, verse 11, he tells people that he baptizes with water for repentance, but the one who is coming is more powerful, one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

Jesus' coming will bring the breath of life and the fire of cleansing.

What's more Jesus didn't need a new start in obeying God because he had always obeyed God.

That's why as he came up out of the water God spoke and said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

But that still leaves the question, "Why did he need to do it?" Why did Jesus need to be baptized?

Jesus says in verse 15, *"Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."*

There was a sense in which Jesus did need to be baptized.

He says it's to fulfill all righteousness. That is, to fulfill God's law.

In the sermon on the mount, Matthew 5:17, we have these words of Jesus recorded for us:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."

Jesus' whole life was intended to fulfill the law and its requirements.

So, his baptism by John isn't a sign that he needed to repent, but rather a sign that he identifies with all those who live under the law, and that he himself, submits to that law.

His submitting to baptism says that John's message is right. That people do need to submit to God's law if they're to be ready for the coming of the King.

One of the reasons for Jesus being baptized by John, was to identify with us in our weakness and that he understands what we go through.

Jesus' Baptism is a means of identifying himself with us

But also, his baptism by John is a sign of his humility. One of the things you see in corporate life is the way new managers try to distance themselves from their predecessors. They don't want to be compared with them; in case they suffer by comparison.

I read about someone once saying to their Vicar, *"You know, you're the worst vicar we've ever had. But don't feel bad about it. It's just that you could never be as good as the one you've replaced, and he could never have been as good as the one before him and so on."*

Well, that's how life is sometimes, particularly if you follow someone who had a well loved and successful ministry.

So, we tend to avoid comparisons with our predecessors. But not so Jesus. It's a sign of his humility, that he comes to John, he lowers himself into the muddy waters of the Jordan River and submits to the ministry of his predecessor; of his herald.

We all know that Jesus died for our sins and took them to the cross, but have you ever wondered when did Jesus take on the sins of the world? Was it at his birth? Was it during his ministry with his disciples? was it at the cross? Biblical scholars agree that it was at his moment of baptism.

In that momentary solemn act of completely lowering himself into the Jordan river, we see where our Lord Jesus, he who is without sin, symbolically taking on himself, the sins of the world.

Those waters, that have washed away the sins of the people, now cover Jesus, as he voluntarily lowers himself into the living waters of the Jordan River.

Summary:

What difference does this make to what we're doing here today?

What difference does it make for us that Jesus began his ministry with this act of being baptized?

I guess the first thing to say is that Jesus' submission to baptism is a commendation to us of the value of baptism for us.

If he, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour, the one who knew no sin, chose to begin his public ministry with an act of baptism, then we should be encouraged to see baptism as an important act of initiation for all who are followers of Christ.

But that's not the main issue is it? A much more important issue for us is the fact that by this act, Jesus identifies with us.

Sometimes we wonder whether God really understands what we're going through, particularly when things are tough, and we wonder whether he really appreciates how hard it is to live in this broken world.

But here we see Jesus identifying with us in this practical way of submitting to John's baptism, to remind us that yes, he does understand what it's like to live in a fallen world, where things don't always go right, where people hate you and persecute you for doing good, where people break God's laws and need to repent, and where people suffer through no real fault of their own.

When we come to God in repentance, asking him to forgive us, we can have confidence that he knows how hard it is to resist temptation.

Jesus even knows how hard it is to lower ourselves, to admit our failure. Have you noticed how the hardest part of repentance is often that it requires us revising our view of ourselves as being beyond reproach?

We build up this self-image that says that we're not to blame.

If things go wrong, it's always the other persons fault.

It's hard to submit and submerge ourselves to a baptism of repentance

if we take it seriously. We don't like to admit that we're less than perfect, and most of us here today would like to think that we are without fault.

But the reality we acknowledge by the act of baptism, is that we all need to be washed clean, purified, given new life in Jesus Christ.

Our Lord Jesus knows what we are truly like.

Jesus lived life as a human being, he went down into the waters of the Jordan as a sign of human imperfection, even though he suffered no imperfection in his own obedience to God.

If we meditate on that fact it might make it easier for us to face up to our own limitations, our own imperfections as far as our obedience to God is concerned.

But, finally, there's another important element in this story for us today.

It appears as Jesus is coming up out of the water.

16 "Suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'"

Here, right at the beginning of his ministry, we see Jesus' glory manifest. Even now when he's lowered himself as far as he can go, God speaks and attests to his real glory, that of the only begotten Son of the Father.

It's as though Matthew wants to remind us from the beginning, that this Jesus isn't just a great teacher and healer.

He isn't just the greatest of the prophets.

No, he's the beloved Son of God, with whom God is well pleased.

This Jesus, who lowers himself to the depth of us failed human beings, is the Beloved Son of the Living God.

His baptism, unnecessary as it was in terms of repentance from sin, nevertheless shows us the importance of submitting to God's law, submitting to God's will for human life.

It encourages us that Jesus was truly human, that he understands what it means to be a human being.

Lesson for today

So, what is the lesson for us today?

I believe that the main lesson is that of obedience to the word of God. Jesus baptism was an ultimate display of his obedience to the Father

But most importantly, he was obedient for us, he was obedient for every single one of us. Through his baptism, Jesus took on the sins of the world, he took on my sins, he took on all your sins.

We began this message reading Genesis 1:10 "*When God gathered the waters together into seas, He caused the earth to be resurrected out of its watery grave*". Do you now see the link?

We saw earlier that a baptism was held in a mikvah, which means a place of gathered waters. Waters gathered by God, living waters.

God created the perfect earth and then he created mankind, who, given free will, sinned against God's instruction, was disobedient to God and thus made the world imperfect. God then comes down to earth, becomes man and in **His** baptism, as in creation, comes out of the watery grave, out of the womb of gathered waters, and takes on the sins of mankind.

And through his act of obedience to God. We all have the opportunity, that by committing our life to Jesus, and through our obedience to God, we together can make his world perfect again.

Jesus was obedient to God.

The question that that leaves us with is, "Are you, and I, being obedient to God?"

Are you, and I, living each day with our gift of life, are we being

obedient to his word?

I confess there are days that I find myself “drifting” and need a bit of a wakeup call and humbly offer up a prayer of confession and forgiveness.

Is that you also? Are you finding yourself at times drifting from the word of God?

Let’s all begin this year, with the desire to be like Jesus and be obedient to Gods word.

To conclude this message today, I invite you to join with me in a prayer of re-commitment for the new year of 2020.

You can either repeat each line after me or say it quietly in you mind.

Let us pray a Recommitment Prayer

“Lord Jesus, I admit that I have at times strayed away from you and have become lukewarm in my faith.

I repent for not giving You total control of my life.

Lord Jesus, please fill me anew with Your love and peace and renew my strength, faith and hope, and I dedicate my life anew to you, my Lord and Saviour

In Jesus name. Amen.”

