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Sermon

Epiphany – the Baptism of Christ

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; John 1:29-34

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This season after Christmas is called “Epiphany” – literally the revealing. It is about the ways in which God is revealed in Christ to the nations. Last week, we heard of the visit of the Magi who came from afar to worship him as a young child.

Now we skip forward to his entry into public ministry at his baptism. As Luke tell us in verse 23, he was about 30 years old. That is a significant number in our understanding of what was happening. Thirty was the age at which levites and priests started to minister in the temple. David was 30 when he became King. It was the age of maturity.

I want to hold in parallel Luke’s and John’s accounts of the baptism of Jesus. Firstly, let’s review what Luke tells us.

You will remember that a couple of weeks ago we heard about John’s parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth. John was six months older than Jesus. We know that their mothers were related, so they were cousins of some degree. John was given the ministry of herald for the Messiah. He was to announce the coming of the Messiah and to prepare his way.

And that is what we find him doing when the story starts. He was calling to people to repent from their sins and to be baptised in the Jordan. This raised questions in people’s minds. It was a time a wide-spread speculation that the Messiah would come. People were starting to wonder if it was actually John himself.

But John insisted that he was just the messenger. The one to come would be greater than he. Let’s hear how the one he was announcing compared to him.

Mightier

The one to come would be more powerful, stronger, mightier than he. The Aramaic New Testament adds, “he is supreme.”

Higher Status

John says he is unworthy to be the slave of the one to come. That’s what he meant when he spoke of untying a sandal – that was the work of a household slave.

In John’s gospel, John the Baptist is reported as saying in 1:30: “A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.” This enigmatic statement can be understood when we realise that John was older

than Jesus so Jesus came after him, yet Jesus is the eternal one, so he came before John. "A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me."

A bit further on in John's gospel in chapter 3, John the Baptist's disciples were concerned that Jesus' following had grown greater than John's. John's answer tells us more about his view of Jesus:

John 3:29-30 "The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. ³⁰ He must increase, but I must decrease."

Here he used the analogy of a groom and bestman. The bestman supports the groom but it is the groom who gets the bride. So John's role was to announce and prepare for Jesus then to step aside. "He must increase but I must decrease."

Different Ministries

How else does John compare himself with Jesus? He compared their baptismal ministries:

"I baptise you with water. But ... he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. (Lk 3:16)

John took the standard Jewish ritual purification process and reinterpreting it for use in as a major repentance – a change of direction and loyalty. This use of baptism fulfils the promise in Ezekiel 36

Ezekiel 36:25-27 I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

John said of the Coming One that he would not baptize in water but in Holy Spirit and with fire.

To baptise is simply to immerse. John foresaw Jesus immersing people in the Holy Spirit and in fire. That was to come later with the disciples after the resurrection and more widely at Pentecost. The fire has several meanings. It can be the empowering passion in the Spirit of God, the cleansing work of the Holy Spirit in a disciple's life or the consuming judgement. His following comments relate more to judgement as he sees beyond to the work of judgement to come. There he uses the language of winnowing the grain. That is the process of separating the grain from the chaff after it has been threshed. The chaff is the waste fibre of the wheat stalk, leaves and the structures holding the wheat seeds. It is gathered up and burnt.

So the scene is set and Jesus approached John and asked him to baptise him. Only Matthew tells us that John protested that Jesus should baptise him not the other way around – so we will leave that for when I am preaching again on Matthew's account.

The Baptism

Luke tells us simply that Jesus was baptised and then as he was praying afterwards, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. And a voice came from heaven saying: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

A priest had to be ritually washed and then anointed before he took up office. Jesus was to be the high priest of the order of Melchizedek.

A king had to be anointed before he could act with power.

The Messiah by definition had to be anointed since it means the anointed one.

In each case, the anointing represented the Holy Spirit. Here at the Jordan, Jesus received not the symbol but the reality - the Holy Spirit in power to be equipped as priest, king and Messiah.

At the same time, God spoke over him from heaven saying, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." [Luke 3:22]

This resonated with two Messianic scriptures. Psalm 2 tells of the Messiah ruling over the rebellious nations.

"I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill." ⁷ I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father. ⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.

And Isaiah 42:1 "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations.

What an affirmation! What a commission as Jesus started his ministry! "You are my son whom I love, with you I am well pleased."

This was indeed the Holy Spirit empowering of Jesus to minister as Messiah.

When we turn to John's gospel (1:29-34), the baptism itself is not described. Rather we find John the Baptist explaining what had happened.

He said, "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the Holy Spirit.'"

Remember that Epiphany means the revelation of God incarnate to the nations. In the light of that, hear John's statement of his purpose in verse 31: "... the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

John's ministry was to reveal the Christ to Israel. Have you had that epiphany yourself? I was in conversation with two Christian women on Friday and we had all once thought that Jesus was not God but a good man. We had all had a time when we realised that what the Bible is saying is that in Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal God took a human body and lived a human life. Jesus was not just a good man or a fine teacher – he was and is God the Son fully God and fully man.

When John the Baptist saw Jesus again, he confidently exclaimed, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" And, "I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God. [v34]"

Can you say, Jesus is the Lamb of God who died to take away my sins and the sins of the world? Can you say, "Jesus is the Son of God"?

That is the epiphany (the revelation) we celebrate today. At Christmas, we sang the carol, "O Come All Ye Faithful." It addresses Jesus: as "God of God, Light of light, ... Very God (that is true God); Begotten not created; Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing."

This is the wonder of Epiphany: In Christ, Emmanuel – God himself is with us.