

***May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable unto You, O Lord our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.***

What is it about the definition of baptism that gets us all worked up? Is baptism the start of a life-long journey with Christ shaped as much by a family culture as by the individual themselves, or is it a gate at the end of a period of training that only fully cognisant adults can take on their own? These ideas remain at opposite ends of a spectrum that define doctrinal differences between our church and several others. But do they really matter? What is it about the baptism of Jesus that is so important? Wasn't He sinless from the very beginning and right throughout His human life? If so, why did Jesus need to be baptised at all?

While all the gospels provide their own context and some go into a lot more detail, Mark's is quite straight forward. Let's take a closer look and see if we can identify what's going on from the key elements:

- Jesus' cousin John 'the baptiser' lived in the wilderness and proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He wore clothes made from camel hair and a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey;
- People came from miles around to confess their sins and be baptised in the River Jordan;
- John baptised with water, and knew that he was not the One, but he also knew that the Messiah was coming and He would baptise the people with the Holy Spirit; and
- At the event of Jesus' baptism, when Jesus was coming up out of the water, John saw the heavens torn apart, and the Spirit descended on Him like a dove. A voice came from heaven saying "You are My

Son, the Beloved, with You I am well pleased";

- Straight after this, Jesus went into the wilderness for forty days and was living with the wild beasts while angels waited on Him. At the end of this He was tempted by Satan.

John most likely knew from his family narrative that there was something very special about his cousin. Can you imagine that the two boys wouldn't have heard about what Zephaniah and Elizabeth discovered about not only their son, but also young Mary's child? Remember that John was the first messenger from God for the people of God in more than 400 years. His decision to live in the wilderness and wear funny clothes (even for his time) is perhaps less about him making a fashion statement and more about drawing direct connections both with the prophet Elijah and with Moses' journey out of slavery through the wilderness.

All the gospels make a big point about the numbers of people involved here; it was a lot! Trust the voice of the masses. If you try to visualise the crowds associated with music concerts like *Woodstock* or *Glastonbury* or *The Mission* in Hawkes Bay, you could be forgiven making a connection with all sorts of other entertainment ... but here the people were gathering for repentance and forgiveness, and *baptism* a ritual set aside for Gentile converts ... quite a different vibe, and then John goes on about the One who is to come being even bigger news!

Then we have the physical disruption to the day ... the divine interference with the time/space continuum ... the heavens were torn apart ... just as the curtain in the Temple would be torn apart at the event of

Jesus' death, and the Red Sea was parted during the escape from Egypt back in the day. I get the impression it was more than just the clouds parting ... "and the Spirit descended on Him like a dove" (Luke adds that it was in bodily form). I think most of us like to be called someone's *beloved*, but just imagine how Jesus felt when God the Father called Him *The Beloved*! Anytime God the Father shows up to tell His Son that He's proud of Him is special.

There are plenty of hidden messages in what's going on here; we just need to understand the context and the local lingo. But I feel as though there is plenty of hidden stuff going on for Jesus too.

The Holy Spirit has a mission to reveal things to us that were previously hidden. As the Spirit descended on Jesus at His baptism, so we too can receive the Holy Spirit in our lives. When we are baptised, we take on Christ's death and resurrection; we gain our redemption through His work in the world. The same things are still there to be seen by those who are all around us, but Christ through the Holy Spirit changes our context, our language ... and as a consequence more detail becomes visible ... at the very least it is clearer ... it makes sense. I wonder if Polaroid sunglasses might be a suitable metaphor?

Think of what we see on a bright sunny day ... if we look for example, at a river with no sunglasses or with lenses that aren't polarised. We take in a certain amount of the image before us but compare that with what is revealed if our lenses are polarised ... a whole new world beneath the surface becomes visible because we can see past the glare and the shine; even driving down the road is more comfortable because the distortion caused by glare is reduced. We get a new, altogether better perspective of the same world. The content hasn't changed, but the context has because of our ability to see past the barrier ... perhaps, as a consequence, we will see

more clearly what it is that we need to do next. I'm not advocating that we all go and buy Polaroid sunglasses to discern our way forward here, only that we make ourselves available to receive the Holy Spirit!

You've all heard me say that baptism is a *Sacrament* ... an outward and visible sign of something that is hidden and invisible. In our case baptism is symbolic of our reception of the Holy Spirit ... becoming a child of God, a member of the body of Christ. In Jesus' case that seems to have been much more than just symbolic! We get a sense too of the nature of time the way God sees it ... we hear that God is *well pleased* with His only Son ... even before He has commenced His earthly ministry. Jesus did not sin and therefore didn't need John's baptism of repentance and forgiveness, but baptism was an outward sign *to Him* that He had His Father's pleasure and support for what was to come. Jesus' baptism was a powerful and outward sign *to those on the banks of the Jordan* that day that John was indeed speaking the word of God about the need for repentance and forgiveness ... that Jesus was indeed someone more powerful than John, but perhaps that both were divinely connected to the prophets and to the Truth.

To us perhaps, it was an inward sign of grace, that *we need* to seek and listen to Him, believe in Him; that we should align our view of the world with His and look for the Spirit to guide us in all we do everyday.

No, Jesus did not need baptism in the same sense that we do, but God needed to make a statement in the world about who Jesus was and Whose work He was here to do. Aligning ourselves with Him and doing His work is already the best we can hope for.

**Amen.**