

Matthew 3^{13–17}
(Isaiah 42^{1–9} ; Acts 10^{34–43})

Baptism of Christ

Ballarat Cathedral 8th January, 2023

Today is the first Sunday of Epiphany, which, as the Bishop reminded us last week, means *lighting up* or *illumination*—revealing something that was previously hidden. In Epiphany we reflect on significant moments in which Jesus was revealed as God's own Son and his mission as the work of God.

Last Sunday we remembered the wise men who had seen a star rising in the east and realised that it heralded the birth of the King of the Jews. On the final Sunday of Epiphany, we will meditate on the Transfiguration, when Jesus' glory was shown to a few of his disciples on a mountain-top.

Today we are reminded of the beginning of the story of Jesus' active life as recorded by Matthew. To this point in his gospel, Matthew has not reported anything Jesus has said or any activities he engaged in. The gospel refers to quite a lot of talking about the young Jesus, and a number of things done to him and for him, but entirely by others. It is all a preamble to Jesus' mind-blowing teaching and life-changing actions in the few short years of his ministry on earth.

And in today's passage Matthew sets that whole life in context. He gives us an insight—an epiphany—into what that life means. Jesus' first reported action is to walk from Galilee to the Jordan River, where John is busily baptising lots of people. The journey would have taken about two days. Jesus' first words are directed to John, as he asks to be baptised.

I must say I used to be puzzled by this emphasis on Jesus' getting baptised. All four gospels describe the incident, and it seemed odd to make such a big deal of it. How many of us think of our baptism as a major life event?

And, even more puzzling, why did Jesus need to be baptised at all? The gospel says that John was preaching baptism as a sign of repentance, but, if Jesus was the Son of God, surely he didn't have to repent of anything. Of course, I wasn't the first one to struggle with this: John did, too. "Why are you coming to me for baptism—you should be baptising me!"

But when you think about it, there comes that epiphany. Matthew is making an important point here. In baptism, the central focus is not on the one doing the baptising, as though he has some particular status. The focus is on who is being baptised. John's mission was all about the people, not himself. He said to the crowds who came out to see him, "You must repent of your sin. But it's not just a matter of saying you do: you must make it public, by being baptised and demonstrating by the way you live your lives that you have had a true change of heart."

Now this would have been pretty shocking to his audience. Never, in the long history of Israel, had any of the prophets and religious leaders suggested that the Jewish people needed to be baptised, because they were already the people of God. Baptism was only for those people who were not born Jews, but want to join God's family. Matthew saw a revelation that the attitudes and behaviour of the Children of Israel had necessitated a massive shift in God's dealings with them.

What John is saying, in effect, is what all the OT prophets before him had said: as a nation you have all drifted so far away from God that you are no longer his people. Repent, turn around, return to him, and become his people again through the waters of baptism.

"No," says John, just because you are descendants of Abraham, you are not automatically God's kingdom. It isn't a matter of who your ancestors were, but who you really are in your heart of hearts. If your hearts are evil, if you live for yourselves and not for God and

for others, you are no more members of God's family than these stones you see lying around.

Matthew grasped this, and that is why he puts it at the start of his life-story of Jesus. The focus in baptism is on the one being baptised. Here, it is Jesus, making a public identification with his people. He says to John,

It is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness [in the Bible, righteousness is the word for *what God requires*]

Jesus was, in actuality, making a solemn promise that his entire life, right to his cruel death, was to be lived, not for his own benefit, but for all, whatever the consequences.

That is an epiphany, a powerful insight, and it has very practical implications for us who want to follow him.

Most, if not all, of us will have been baptised. Whether this took the form of infant baptism followed by confirmation at an older age, or the form of believers' baptism, following a decision to follow Jesus—either represents a public commitment to follow Our Lord in serving the people of God. Being baptised reminds us very powerfully that becoming a Christian means, as John stressed and Jesus demonstrated, being part of a community. Salvation is not about me, the individual, but about us, the people of God.

In the season of Epiphany, may the Spirit of God enlighten us. It is not a matter of what our baptism or confirmation meant for us years ago, but what it means for us every day of our lives. How can we live a baptised life? In what ways can we be servants to those we come in contact with? How can we live, not only with others, but for them?

As Matthew wrote about Jesus, may our own lives—everything we do and say—be a constant reflection of our baptism.