

Isaiah 42¹⁻⁹ ; Acts 10³⁴⁻⁴³ ; Matthew 3¹³⁻¹⁷

Baptism of Christ

Ballarat Cathedral 8th January, 2023

Today is the first Sunday of Epiphany, which means *lighting* up or *illumination*—revealing something that was previously hidden. In Epiphany we reflect on some 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 turn our attention to Jesus' baptism, which we have just heard from Matthew's gospel, and which marks the beginning of the entire story of Jesus' active life. To this point in the gospel, Jesus has not said anything. Many things have been said about him—by angels to Mary and Joseph; by the wise men to Herod; and by John the Baptist to the crowds. Nor has Jesus done anything, although many things have happened to him through his childhood. All of this is just the preamble to Jesus' own words and actions, which form the remainder of the gospel, and which start here, at his baptism.

The action of his adult life begins when Jesus goes to John and asks to be baptised. Have you ever wondered why the church considers Jesus' baptism as significant? It is not immediately obvious. Jesus' birth and his death and resurrection are obviously central to our understanding of Jesus and his work. But it is less obvious what his baptism means for us.

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. John was puzzled, too. "Why are you coming to me for baptism—you should be baptising me!"

There seem to me to be two things that can help us to arrive at an answer to this question.

One is the context in which John was baptising. He travelled throughout the region surrounding the river preaching that the people needed to repent and be baptised. Vast crowds came out to hear him, and he gave them a pretty severe talking-to. "It's no good saying you repent," he said, "Unless you are baptised and demonstrate by the way you live your lives that you have had a true change of heart."

Now this was pretty shocking to his audience. Never in the long history of the Jewish people had any of the prophets and religious leaders suggested that *they* should be baptised. We already are the people of God, they said. Baptism is only for those people who were not born Jews, but want to join us as members of God's family.

Oh no, said John, you can't simply assume that, because you are descendants of Abraham, you are automatically his people. God's kingdom isn't a matter of who your ancestors are, but of who you really are in your heart of hearts. If your hearts are evil, if you live for yourselves and are not for God and for others, you are no more members of God's family than these stones you see lying around.

Baptism is a public sign of a change of heart, and is re-enacted in the way you live for the good of God's family, by serving one another.

Jesus clearly wanted to begin his ministry with that public commitment. His life was always, and utterly, to be lived, not for his own benefit, but for all, whatever the consequences. He was willing even to lay down his life for his friends, those who sought to follow his teachings.

That, I believe, is why Jesus undertook the very public act of submitting himself to John to be baptised. It was, in effect, a solemn promise that he identified himself with God's people, and would from now on live only for them.

The second point about the significance of today's service arises from this. Most, if not all, of us here this morning will have been baptised. What does that mean for the way we live our lives? Two kinds of baptism are recognised throughout the Christian church, and for centuries there have been many debates about which is the more appropriate. As far as I am concerned, both are legitimate, and each of them captures an important aspect of the truth of what it means to call ourselves followers of Jesus.

Probably the large majority of us were baptised as infants, in a service demonstrating that the faithful community welcomes this new, very young member into their midst, and promises to help the child to grow up in the knowledge and love of God. It reminds us very powerfully that becoming a Christian means, as John emphasised, being part of a community. Salvation is not about me, the individual, but about us, the people of God.

The other form of baptism, widely practised in parts of the church, is so-called "believers' baptism", or baptism of adults. This was the form of baptism I received, as a young man. The emphasis in this approach is on the conscious

decision to follow Jesus in making a public commitment to the people of God.

In the week ahead, may God enable us to take Jesus' baptism as our guide. In practical terms, how can we live humbly? 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?

Let it be so now and always; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all that God requires.