

Sermon - 10th January 2021 - The Baptism of Jesus - St Mark 1: 4-11

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There are some experiences which have the effect of changing the direction of our lives and deciding our attitudes for better or for worse. Experiences which can be absolutely crucial to us – and one of these was the experience Jesus had at his baptism. This was a turning point in his life. And, it is the key to understanding His ministry.

This morning, I simply want to try to show what this Baptism experience meant to Jesus – and what it implies for us who are committed to following him.

Why was Jesus baptised? After all John was baptising people on the basis of their repentance. His message was that God's judgment was just round the corner and the only way which people could escape it was to confess their sins and do so in a deliberate act of repentance – to turn away from the things they did wrong. But surely Jesus didn't have any need to be baptised on those conditions? So, why then, did he accept John's baptism?

Well, there can only be one answer. These were the people who Jesus had come to save and how could he save them except by getting alongside them? By identifying himself completely with them? That is the reason Jesus was baptised. He got down into the water alongside men, women and children – and identified Himself with them in their need.

Which is what Christmas was all about. At Bethlehem God became man – Human - for us all and for our salvation, and the whole of Jesus' ministry after his baptism was consistent with this. He didn't stand apart from sinners. He accepted the hospitality of those who the religious leaders saw as contaminated, the blemished and the impure. He was constantly being accused of being 'the friend of publicans, prostitutes and sinners' in defiance of the Jewish law which said that a good man kept his hands clean and avoided notorious sinners like the plague.

But not Jesus. He deliberately 'went to them' with the offer of God's forgiveness and the chance of a new life. And this complete self-identification with sinners is shown at his Baptism and again at The Cross. Because on the Cross Jesus experienced that separation from God which is the penalty of sin. 'My God,' he cried, 'why have you forsaken me?'

So, Jesus identified himself with men, women and children at his Baptism. And as he comes out of the water he has an overwhelming experience of God. It's as if the heavens open and he hears a voice: I believe these words are vitally important. At this point Jesus understood what was happening and why! 'You are my own dear Son', they come from Psalm 2 – a psalm all about God's chosen King – The Messiah. So, at this moment, Jesus was assured by God that he was the Messiah. This was to be his ordination!

And so it was now beyond any shadow of doubt that His relationship was confirmed. 'You are my beloved Son!' It was here Jesus realised who he was and he was shaken by that realisation. And he was also shaken by the words which followed: 'I am pleased with you'. These words come right at the beginning of Isaiah 42 and it's a passage where Isaiah describes the character and mission of the person God would send. According to Isaiah he would be a servant, and more than that he would be a suffering servant, taking on himself the consequences and the penalty of the sins of others.

So, it's at this point the meaning of Jesus's baptism becomes clear. He was chosen to be the Son of God. And this was the moment of his ordination. From now on his ministry as Messiah begins, but it's to be mainly a ministry of Service, and it will lead inevitably to suffering. And the only way the ministry can be fulfilled is through a complete commitment and identification with men, women and children.

So, what does this mean for us today? Simply this: That the way we live in the world and the kind of servant to which God calls us as Christians is the same for us as it was for Jesus. The pattern of our life must be one of involvement in the world and identification with people in need. We can't escape the hard fact that this will be a costly experience and it could well lead to suffering for us too.

It never ceases to amaze me that Christians have often turned this truth inside out and upside down. All through the history of the Church there have been Christians who've argued that the world is bad, and that our best response would be to separate ourselves from the world and its bad influences - like the Pharisees did! Well - some have fled into the desert to get away from the temptations and sinfulness of life. And more recently they have taken refuge in the Church – which is thought of by some to be a sort of modern Noah's Ark while the world outside is overwhelmed by the floodwaters of God's judgment.

And you know, it's this sort of attitude which says that politics are dangerous and dirty, having fun is sinful, and Christians should have nothing to do with either. Well, of course, Jesus did the opposite. He got involved. Nothing and nobody was too dirty or sinful for him. He went into the world to save the world. And through him, God's power was at work changing and transforming human situations which the Pharisees just wouldn't touch. And this reminds me all the time of what we also should be doing.

But, you know, life is even more than that. There is the world of work, and the day to day life of this community. As Christians we are to get involved in all the situations of our human society, and so bring the power of the Gospel into every part of life, and you can't do that if you stand apart and opt out of our world.

Because of the continued horror of COVID-19 there are all sorts of needs amongst the peoples of this community - though you'd never guess because often they're hidden! Could we – as a family – undertake some sort of project? Maybe to help support those who we know have a need, maybe food parcels, or someone just to check that they're alright, and especially those people who are lone parents and can't really afford to get to the shops, and those vulnerable older people living on their own.

This way we'd work together as a team and become truly a Gospel Church – a church 'on the move', one coming alongside and serving others in their need – as Jesus did! - going down into the waters of Baptism – as He did – to come alongside the people of our Parish. Will you give one of the church leaders your name and 'phone number if you're willing to grow the Kingdom of God in this way?

The way of Jesus is the way of loving service, of costly involvement with the world. This is God's way. And this is the way Jesus calls us to go too.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.