



Baptism of the Lord – Year C

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth

We have just listened to the story of the baptism of Jesus from the Gospel of St Luke. In the Church's ancient tradition, this feast is always closely linked to the feast of the Epiphany, which we celebrated last week, and with the miracle at Cana where Jesus changes water into wine. In each of these three stories the central message is that the true meaning of the life and mission of Jesus is being made known.

In many ways the story of the baptism of Jesus is a strange one and I am sure that many of us are as puzzled by it today as John the Baptist and the people gathered by the bank of the River Jordan must have been at the time. Today's gospel points out that before Jesus presented Himself for baptism John had already spoken of Him as the one who would baptize others, not with water but with the Holy Spirit and with fire. As one of the other gospel writers tells us, John in fact questioned Jesus saying that he, John, needed baptism from Jesus rather than the other way around. And yet Jesus replied that difficult thought it was, John had to accept that this was something that, in God's plan, simply had to take place.

Because we know that Christian baptism is so closely linked to the idea of forgiveness of sin, we too might wonder why Jesus had to be baptized. After all, he had no sin that needed forgiveness, and he had no need to turn back to God or open his life to God as he was already, and always, fully in communion with God his Father. So what, we might ask, is the real meaning of the baptism of Jesus?

Part of the explanation, I believe, lies in what happens next in the story. As Jesus comes up out of the water the clouds part, the Spirit of God descends on Jesus, and the voice of God the Father is heard: *"You are my son, the beloved. My favour, my seal of approval, rests on you"*. And as the other gospel accounts of this event make clear, this voice was heard not just by Jesus alone but by those who were also present with Him.

What is happening at the baptism of Jesus is the proclamation by God that this Jesus, seemingly a man like everyone else, though an extraordinarily good man, is in reality so closely at one with God that God calls Him his beloved Son and reveals the presence of the Holy Spirit who is always with Him. Just as Jesus is proclaimed as the saviour of all people, and not just the Jews, when the wise men, non-Jews, come from far away to



worship Him in Bethlehem, and just as Jesus is revealed as the bringer of life and joy into people's lives at the Wedding Feast of Cana, so today Jesus is revealed in all His glory as the only Son of God and the bearer of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of Jesus is the confirmation of what St Luke's Gospel has already told us: that Jesus is not just another, though especially good, man - Jesus is the presence of God among us.

A proclamation like this calls for a response. It called for a response from those who were there at his baptism and from those who would encounter Him during his life - and it calls for a response from us as well. Our faith is not meant to be a set of dry academic teachings. It is meant to be a sincere, enthusiastic and ongoing response to the incredible truth that God, who is the creator and sustainer of everything that exists, has come among us as one of us in Jesus, so that in Jesus we might see the face of God, hear His voice, experience His love and mercy, and respond to Him in faith.

The words which we hear at the baptism of Jesus find an echo in another incident much later in Jesus' ministry. It is the event we know as the Transfiguration. On that occasion too those who are with Jesus see Him as he really is, transfigured and standing in the presence of Moses and Elijah. In the man Jesus they see the glory and presence of God and just as at the baptism so here too they hear the Father's voice. This time, however, something that is only implicit at the baptism becomes very explicit. As well as the Father's voice proclaiming, "*This is my son, my beloved. He enjoys my favour*", the disciples also hear the words which follow immediately: "*Listen to Him*".

This of course is the response which God is asking of us as well. As Christians it is not enough for us to hold some truths just in an intellectual way. Our faith must engage all of us, not just our minds. It must, we might say, also engage our hearts if it is to be real. And this perhaps is the question today's celebration puts before us: in my day to day life, with all its challenges and its possibilities, are the eyes of both my mind and my heart fixed on Jesus? If he really is God's Son, as today's gospel proclaims Him to be, isn't this precisely where my life should be centred? Am I really listening to his voice each day? And this leads to an even more challenging question: what am I doing to respond to this voice, to this call of the Lord in my life?

We do, of course, need to train ourselves to listen - and in our noisy and busy lives this is not always easy. Apart from the obvious fact that when we come to Mass we have the scriptures read and explained for us, one of the reasons why the Church is so insistent on the need to come to Mass each week is because it provides us with such a precious opportunity to step aside from our normal activities and enter into a different space where everything is designed to help us enter into a time of communion with God.

Today then, let us allow the gospel to challenge us not in an accusing way but with a precious invitation: in Jesus we encounter the Beloved Son of God and come to know God, and His love for us, in a new and powerful way: why would we not want to listen to Him and then respond to Him with love and in faith?