

Reflection for 1st Sunday after Epiphany by Rev'd Peter Shaw

John the Baptist, Preparer of the Way

At first glance, this passage can be puzzling in that it tells us that Jesus was baptised – after all, He was devoid of human sin, so let's have a look in more detail at this passage and what it really means.

We read at the beginning of Luke 3 that "the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah in the desert. He went into all the country around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (v. 3). Luke tells us that this fulfils the words of the prophet Isaiah: "A voice of one calling in the desert, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him. Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill made low. The crooked roads shall become straight, the rough ways smooth. And all mankind will see God's salvation'." (vv. 4-6) John's was an important work of preparation, for the coming of Christ, but he spoke very sternly to the crowds that came to see him; Baptism itself would be no guarantee of their salvation. He was calling them to true repentance - a turning away from their sins, a changed behaviour.

People asked whether John was the expected Messiah.

In response we hear that John said; I'm not the Messiah. I am preparing the way for one greater, who is coming. I am not even good enough to untie his sandals. "He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire" (vv. 16c-17).

With a wooden shovel the Palestinian farmer would toss the crushed stalks of wheat into the air. The heavier grain fell quickly to the ground, while the lighter chaff was blown by the wind to the edge of the threshing area, where it was gathered and later burned. The picture of winnowing wheat is frequently used in Scripture for separation and fiery judgement. So we read, for instance, in Isaiah 29.5, "But [*Jerusalem,*] your many enemies will become like fine dust, the ruthless hordes like blown chaff".

John's call to repentance was a stern warning of coming judgment. And his prophecy of the coming one baptising with holy wind and fire, seems to be a continuation of the strong judgment theme.

Much later when Jesus was asking his disciples what the crowds were saying about him, one of the opinions expressed was that he must be "John the Baptist" (Mt. 16.14). The opening of his ministry seemed like John's - calling people to "repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is near" (Mt 3.2; 4.17).

But - it was radically different.

Jesus said, "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John; yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Lk. 7.28). The story of God's self-revelation and all his action on behalf of a fallen race, had changed gear with the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. Perhaps that is why Luke does something unusual with the story at this point.

Did you notice what he did?

Luke has been describing the baptism and teaching of John, leading to John's announcement of the one who is to follow. Then he tells about John's arrest and imprisonment by Herod (*verses 18 – 20 that we have missed*). After that he tells us about the baptism of Jesus - without mentioning John!

There is no question that John was the one who baptised Jesus and, elsewhere in the other gospels - for example in Matthew, we have the conversation where John says; it is Jesus who should be baptising him and not the other way round (Mt. 3.13-17). Here, Luke is emphasising through the way in which he handles this story, that the ministry of John - and the old covenant - had come to an end, and the ministry of Jesus - and the new covenant - was beginning.

But why was Jesus baptised? After all, he was devoid of human sin.

He wasn't baptized for the same reasons that we need to be; instead, his baptism confirms his identity as the Messiah, the start of His earthly ministry. Jesus baptism demonstrates his willingness to take on human form to be the perfect atonement for all our sin and death. In being baptised Jesus demonstrated a key step in the life of every believer, baptism.

At the end of his life, Jesus instructed his disciples to make disciples in all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (See: [Matthew 28:19](#)). From the beginning to the end of his ministry, Jesus championed the significance of baptism for those who put their [faith](#) in God.

For thirty years Jesus' identity had been hidden. Of course, the angel Gabriel had announced to Mary that "the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (1.35b). And at the time of that Passover visit to Jerusalem, when Jesus was twelve and lingered behind in the Temple, he said to Mary and Joseph, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" (v. 49b). But they didn't fully understand.

But now his true identity is confirmed, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased" (3.22b). And the Holy Spirit came down in bodily form like a dove. These were signs for Jesus. John saw the dove (Jn 1.32), but it is not clear that he heard the voice.

Jesus baptism account is a beautiful portrayal of the loving union of the Trinity – Father, Son and Spirit. This moment in His life marked the beginning of his ministry in which he was partaking in the human experience fully as the spotless lamb of God, sent to save the world. The eternal beloved Son of God - eternally one with the Father and the Holy Spirit - was about to begin his earthly ministry. In the account of his temptation in the wilderness, we are told he was "full of the Holy Spirit" and "led by the Spirit" (4.1). Following the temptation, "Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit" (4.14). His words and actions were a response to the Father (as in Jn 5.19-23; 12.47-50), enabled by the Spirit.

His close relationship with the Father made a big impact on the disciples and led them to ask him how to pray (Lk. 11.1). In the teaching that follows, Jesus tells them that since even sinful human fathers know to give good things to their children, "how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (v. 13)

Jesus was uniquely the beloved Son - Son of God from all eternity. But God loves all of us - frail, human, wayward though we may be. God loves us so much that he gave his only Son Jesus to come and live here and to give his life - for us!

He seeks each of us, not just to receive his redemptive love and forgiveness, but to receive him, to begin a new and deep relationship with him - responsive to his love, empowered by his Spirit, obedient to his will.

And at the end of our earthly lives, he longs to be able to say to us, "Well done, my son/daughter whom I love. I am well pleased with you!"

Will He be saying that to you and me? **AMEN**