

Baptism of Jesus

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I'll be thinking this morning about new beginnings. I think new beginnings are profoundly important – whenever I enter a new phase of my life, I can always vividly remember how it began. I can remember vividly the moment Megan agreed to be my girlfriend, the moment she agreed to be my fiancée, and certainly the moment she agreed to be my wife. Starting well is important. Many of us begin the new year with a bang, watching the London fireworks or celebrating with family. Many people still have new year's resolutions. As a kid, pretty much every year my resolution was to brush my teeth better, and you can tell by the state of my mouth how badly I stuck to it! It's interesting to me that the most common resolutions are about changing one's life – being healthier, spending more time with family, and living life to the fullest, for example. Ultimately this is what baptism is about, new beginning that brings new life and transformation.

One of my favourite parts of studying the Bible is comparing the four gospels and seeing their similarities and differences. All four gospels have an account of Jesus's baptism – so it must be a pretty big deal! Also all four have it right at the start of his ministry, before he actually does anything, which also suggests that this theme of initiation and beginnings is a big deal. But they also emphasise different things – Matthew has an interaction with John the Baptist who is baffled by Jesus coming to him to be baptised, rather than the other way around – Mark emphasises that the kingdom of God has come near with the presence of Jesus – John describes Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, flashing forward to the end of Jesus's ministry. We're looking at Luke's gospel today, and the thing that makes his version unique actually comes before our reading today. John the Baptist discussed with the people what the purpose of baptism actually is: repentance, receiving the Spirit, and transformation. So I'd like to suggest three ways that Luke's version is important for our understanding of Jesus today, as well as its relevance to our own lives.

Firstly, the incarnation. Luke says in verse 21 “when all the people had been baptised, and Jesus also”. Jesus is one of us. No matter how much studying and worshipping I do, I can't get over how incredible it is that the king of kings and lord of lords chose to leave his heavenly throne and make himself just like one of us. Sometimes I also forget how remarkable it is that Jesus was baptised, like John the Baptist says in Matthew's gospel – Jesus didn't need repentance because he was sinless. Yet he still chose to mark the start of his ministry as all his followers do, by dying to his old life and rising to a new one. This also echoes the end of his ministry – Jesus didn't deserve the death he received, but received the death we deserve. Jesus didn't need to be punished, nor baptised, but did so because he was one of us.

Secondly, purification. Luke says verse 16 “he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire”. A lot of people understand this to be about the final judgement – who goes to eternal life, and who is cast into the fires of hell. Actually, I believe this is about purification – once we receive the Holy Spirit, our hearts are purified from the inside out. Just like when gold is purified in a refining fire, when the metal is heated and melted until anything impure rises to the top and the dross is scraped off, our hearts can also gather darkness and impurity. The Holy Spirit doesn't let these weeds choke up the good fruits, and instead burns the chaff to save the wheat. This should also be encouraging because we are not left to sort out our own mess ourselves, but instead we can invite and allow God to do it, as he is truly the only one capable. A little bit of Greek nerdery – all the verbs Luke uses in verses 16 and 17 are what's known as “imperfective” verbs, which means they aren't just a one-time thing but are ongoing. Any gardener will tell you that weeding is not a one-off event, and it needs doing

frequently. So too our hearts can grow weeds if left to its own devices, and we should regularly ask to be filled with the Spirit to purify our hearts.

Thirdly, adoration. Luke says in verse 22 “a voice came from heaven saying ‘You are my son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased’”. God is pleased with Jesus his son before he does anything to earn it. The same is true with us, in fact this is the very reason Jesus came to save us in the first place. You don’t need to earn God’s love, but receive it and then live by it. Perhaps we sometimes think of God’s voice in the Old Testament as one of judgement and anger, and fail to recognise that this passion comes from God’s love and desire for us to love one another, and that God’s heart breaks when we sin or hurt people because we should be living a life of love and relationship with him and one another. If we listen for the voice of God, we will hear a voice of unconditional and unending love, even if sometimes it’s tough love.

So what can this incarnation, purification and adoration mean for us as we kick off 2022? How will we mark this new beginning? We have no idea what may come of this year – we didn’t know that the pandemic would still be raging across the world two years later. We might have plans and desires of what we want to achieve this year, but who knows if they will actually be possible. Instead, let us remember that God is well pleased with us, and offers us transformation from the inside out by receiving the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus demonstrated by becoming one of us. Wherever we are this morning, physically, emotionally and spiritually, let us invite God into our lives to be transformed for his glory. Let’s pray.

Father God, we thank you that your voice is a voice of love, that Jesus showed us the way, and that the Holy Spirit transforms us. We invite you into our lives today to mark the beginning of a new year with you. Transform and empower us, we pray, to live for you wherever we find ourselves, as beloved children of God. Amen.