

The baptism of Christ - Mark 1. 4-11

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. 5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the Jordan River. 6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. 7 And this was his message: "After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie. 8 I baptise you with[a] water, but he will baptise you with[b] the Holy Spirit."

The Baptism and Testing of Jesus

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. 10 Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. 11 And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

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Although we make a big fuss of the birth of Christ, at Christmas, if we followed the Bible, we'd make twice as much fuss about Jesus baptism - which we celebrate / remember this week. Only 2 gospels mention the birth, but all 4 mention the baptism.

Some people don't like the lectionary - a list of readings that guide us through the year. Some also don't like the church following seasons - Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent etc. I can see their point that it can seem repetitive, uncreative, or even restrictive. However - what these things do is hold us to the whole faith - rather than begin stuck on our pet projects - the Holy Spirit, the crucifixion, or whatever - we are compelled to look at things we might forget or overlook.

So - today, in the calendar - its the Baptism of Christ

Quick Question - this is not maths, there's not a right and a wrong - there might be several right answers, and some that are more wrong or right, than others...

First one to answer, just unmute yourself and shout it out... get ready..

If you had a friend who'd never heard the word "baptism" before - like you said, oh I'm going to so and so's baptism on Sunday, and they said - oh that's nice, what's a "baptism"? What would you say it is?

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Ok - but Jesus baptism is not the same as ours.

Because we are baptised into Jesus, we are baptised to join the Christian Church. Jesus was not joining himself, was he?!

He hadn't founded Christianity yet.. so it must have been a different kind of baptism.

So - in breakout rooms - in church I'd make you turn to your neighbour, but I'll put you in groups of 2 or 3 - just for a couple of minutes, you don't have long.. and discuss in families if that works..

The question is - why was Jesus getting baptised? And if you think that's hard to get into, consider it this way - would anything be different if Jesus hadn't been baptised?

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Take some answers..

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Like I say, this is more important Jesus' birth for the gospel writers. In a time where every written word took time and effort and it all had to be copied out by hand, and you don't want to waste it - all 4 thought I need to tell people about this..its vital to stuff you need to know about this person.

Quick show of hands - who thinks John was the only person baptising people that time?

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Ok - so although the word "baptism" is not used to describe the Jewish rituals, the purification rites in Jewish law and tradition have some similarity to baptism, and the two have been linked.

When John the Baptist is in the river baptising people, people didn't walk by and say, "What's he doing? That's a strange thing!" They knew what he was doing, he was baptising; and this probably emerges from the idea of ritual immersion that existed in Judaism long before.

The *tvilah* is the act of immersion in natural sourced water, called a *mikva*.

In the old testament immersion in water for ritual purification was established for restoration to a condition of "ritual purity" in specific circumstances. For example, Jews who (according to the Law of Moses) became ritually defiled by contact with a corpse had to use the *mikvah* before being allowed to participate in the Holy Temple.

So, long before Christianity developed the idea of baptism, Jews had been practicing ritual immersion in the form of entering into a *mikveh*, immersing ones selves and then emerging from that purified.

As well as the Bible, there is archaeological evidence of *mikva'ot* in and around Jerusalem and in a place called Qumran, associated with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. We know that certain ancient authors like Josephus talk about groups like the Essenes who would practice ritual immersion, regular ritual immersion.. And so we actually have textual sources and archaeological evidence that demonstrates that certain groups practiced this ritual purification.

So John is calling out for people to be purified - not before entering a temple, and not for a specific thing that they might have done - but perhaps in a more general way. Get yourself spiritually ready.

And Jesus could have signed up to that.. I want to be spiritually ready for the task I am about to undertake, the mission that is beginning.

And what a fantastic way to start something. It gives me goosebumps to think of John, day after day, preaching and calling people to repent, turn their lives around, all the while looking and thinking - which one of these is the saviour, the promised Messiah. I know God is going to point him out to me in some way, there will be some sign.. is that tall one? Is it that one who keeps weeping? Which one is it?

And Jesus - feeling drawn to what his cousin is doing, being prompted the spirit - now is the time, go there today. And that moment when they look at each other, and the other gospels have more of a tussle, with John saying "no, I mustn't, you don't need it" and Jesus saying "yes yes, I must".

And then Jesus goes down in the water, and when he comes up - there is the dove, there is the voice, and John's like - YES - that's the one! What did I tell you!! God you're great!!

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But let me just finish with a twist..

You see the Jews did have the *mikvah* where this regular, ritual, immersion could and did happen. And people might do this week after week - its what the stone jars are there for at the wedding in Cana.

But its clear that after the return from Babylonian captivity, after the exile, in around 600 BCE, in the time of the second temple onwards - there's another time that *tvilah* is used. And its when people convert to Judaism.

You don't hear a lot about converts - it doesn't happen a lot, but those who change nationality, who become Jewish - are both immersed, baptised, and if they are male - circumcised.

So could it be that what John was doing, and what Jesus understood, was that this was a baptism not of ritual spiritual purity, but joining a new nation. I say nation rather than faith or belief because for Jews (and us) what we do and who we are and what we believe are all joined up.

They're all the same thing. When you become Jewish or Christian, you're not saying I believe x y and z, or I'm going to do a b and c, or even I'm part of this group of people, who are part of this worldwide group. You're saying all 3. We are the people of God - we belong to him and each other. We don't believe in God - as if its something we have a choice over - so much as we know in our hearts that there is a God. Our status as adopted children of God leads us to lives our lives according to his ways, rather than our own or how any other forces or nations tell us.

So this baptism. - is a once off - like circumcision is once off.

Will we need the regular purification, forgiveness of sins - of course, because we'll keep on living in wrong ways, doing wrong things, and not always know there is God as much as we might..

But if this baptism of John was really an initiation, an induction into something new - then no wonder the pharisees were a bit wary, and no wonder Herod - different one to the one who killed the innocents - thought John was a threat - he was starting a different kingdom.

So.. baptism is a one off - a surrendering to God - falling back in the water  
Submerging in the chaos.  
Giving up your life - dying to your self.  
And rising as something new - reborn, out of the waters, a new life, under new rules  
Committed to something new...

And that's why - at the start of the year, we think about Jesus baptism and our own.

Its good to be reminded of those commitments, of those life changing things

In some churches they have a renewal of baptism promises at this time  
In some places they use the Methodist covenant

Yes, baptism is a one off - for us, for Jesus, but we need reminders

Some churches have a holy water stoop, or use the font, so people cross themselves and remind themselves of their baptism promises..

We need to daily give ourselves a new to God