

Readings:

Genesis 1: 1-5

Acts 19: 1-7

Mark 1: 4-11

Why did Jesus have to be baptised?

For the last few years I've been involved in GCSE marking – one of the exams I deal with is Mark's Gospel. I'm not sure which question it is that evokes this comment – perhaps it is the one 'Was Jesus the Son of God?' – but the candidates often write that they can't see why Jesus had to be baptised. Surely if he hadn't sinned he didn't need to be baptised.

That's a fair point, but it depends on a rather simplistic view of baptism – that it is only to do with the removal of sin. Rather like saying we eat to stop ourselves being hungry. Just as eating has a more positive value, so too has baptism. Baptism is about much more than taking away sin. It is about beginning a new life with God at the centre rather than self. It is a new way of living, empowered by the Holy Spirit. It does involve taking away our sinful past, but the important point is that in baptism we become a new person leaving past mistakes behind and starting again with a clean slate, ready to live as God calls us and leads us into discipleship and all that that might entail.

Is that what baptism meant for Jesus? Typical Church of England answer – yes and no. We don't know anything about his life up to this point, apart from the incident recorded in Luke's gospel when Jesus went missing after a visit to Jerusalem when he was twelve. He had remained behind to enjoy the chance of discussing with the religious teachers at the Temple, and was clearly able to hold his own in the debate. Other than that we are told nothing – and what we are not told we probably don't need to know. But we might assume that Mary had plenty to say, explaining the unique way he was born, and all that happened at that time, and who she understood him to be. Wouldn't she also have told him about his cousin John – now prominent in the public eye as John the Baptist?

So we don't know what Jesus was thinking as he left home in Nazareth and went to the river Jordan where John was preaching and baptising the people. We don't know if he was just going to see what John was doing, to see what all the fuss was about, or if he had made the connection between John's preaching about the one who was to come and his own sense that God was calling him to begin his own very special ministry of suffering servanthood, as foretold by the prophet Isaiah.

For what it's worth, I think he knew that God had called him in a special way, and that by being baptised he would be crossing a line, if you like, from his previous, ordinary, working life, probably as a carpenter, living with his family, to being the servant of God doing whatever his Father in heaven asked him to do, including suffering, dying and being raised to fulfil his calling as the Saviour of the world.

We shouldn't underestimate the significance of this step for Jesus. Mark's gospel is about the struggle, the war even, between the goodness of God's kingdom, and evil – personified by the demons who recognised Jesus for who he truly was when he encountered them in the people who came to him for healing – those who were said to be demon-possessed. We might prefer to describe them as suffering from some kind of mental illness but in Mark's gospel the world is portrayed as the realm where evil reigns. In John's gospel the devil is called the ruler of this world, and as such is the cause of all that is evil, and the one who will tempt Jesus in the wilderness as we read in the verses following today's

gospel. He will also tempt Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane but will be defeated in the crucifixion and resurrection. By his baptism, Jesus metaphorically steps out of this world and into the kingdom ruled by his Father, the kingdom in which we are invited to share by our own faith and baptism.

The text of our gospel passage tells us that after being washed in the water of baptism, Jesus received the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable him, empower him, to do all that would be asked of him – healing people, teaching them, and in the end dying and rising again to bring about the possibility for everyone who believed in him to share in the life that God offers. Not only that but he heard the voice of his Father confirming that he was indeed the beloved, God's own Son.

It's possible, probable even, that only Jesus heard God's voice and that others were not aware of the coming to him of the Holy Spirit. But the cosmic significance of the event is not lost on Mark who describes it in startling terms. The heavens, he says, were torn apart. Remember that in the creation account in Genesis, two verses further on from our reading, the sky is described as a dome, a solid structure above which is the place where God lives. So according to Mark this dome is torn open to let God's voice be heard on earth, and to let the Spirit descend on Jesus. The verb Mark uses, σχιζω, means to tear asunder, and Mark uses it again at Jesus' crucifixion when the curtain in the Temple is torn in two, removing the barrier between the Holy of Holies and the rest of the Temple, symbolising the fact that Jesus has removed the barrier between us and God. I mention this because the text in our bibles seems so sanitised compared with what was actually written – we are in danger of missing the significant points. To us the heavens opening just means it suddenly poured with rain.

Jesus' baptism was therefore a cosmic event. Probably not quite the same for us, but nevertheless an important step in the journey of a Christian. It marks the end of one life and the beginning of another, a life begun when we have made a commitment to follow Christ and be his disciple. You might wonder then, how it is that we can baptise children and babies too young to make such a commitment. Let's deal with that first.

The church has always baptised children, believing that it is right to include them. For example as described in Acts 10 and again in Acts 12, when parents came to faith the whole household was baptised, including the household slaves and children. Jesus' own words about letting the children come to him no doubt played a part in this. In our own liturgy for the baptism of children, promises are made to bring up the children in the faith until they are old enough to make a decision for themselves, promises which should be taken seriously and kept. As well as bringing children to faith, I think parents want to know that their child matters and is known to God. Baptism gives that reassurance, and it is not for the church to deny God's blessing to anyone who requests it.

It also seems right that children should be seen as members of the church family just as we are. Which is why in this church we invite those children who want to, to receive the bread and wine of communion before they are confirmed. This is done with parents' agreement and following a course of preparation. Communion is the meal the church family shares together as a sign of our belonging to one another and to Christ. If it is the family meal then every member of the family should be able to share in it. You as parents wouldn't at home say to your children 'We're having our meal but you can't have any, it's not for you.' Unthinkable! So, all who are baptised may share in the church's meal.

Baptism as I have said is the beginning of a new life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus chose to be baptised to begin this new way of life, blessed by God with the power of the Spirit. Jesus obviously

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thought baptism is important – not only his own baptism, but also the final command to his disciples recorded at the end of Matthew's gospel is to go out into the whole world and baptise everyone who believes in him. The early church did just that – there are several references in Acts to people being baptised and Paul has much to say about baptism in his letters.

One of the things Paul says is that baptism is dying to the old way of life and rising to the new life in Christ, which means turning away from sin and evil. It's not that the world is such a terrible place that Christians have no place in it. It's more the undeniable fact that in general the world gets on without God. Not everything that people do is bad, some of it is very good, but for the most part God is ignored, side-lined, and life goes on as if he didn't exist. That is the essence of sin, and it is what Christians are turning away from, to put God at the centre.

The cleansing of baptism also means we are renewed and forgiven for past failings – baptism is a metaphorical bathing or cleansing. In the early church new Christians were baptised on Easter Sunday, symbolic in itself. As part of the ceremony they would remove most of their clothes as far as decency would allow – and after being dunked three times – in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit – they would be given new white robes to put on. Stripping off the old and putting on the new is a good way of summarising what baptism is about. Being baptised into Christ as Paul puts it also means we are become a member of the Body of Christ, a member of the whole church – not just this one.

Baptism is the sign and symbol of our new life in Christ and with it we may expect to see the Holy Spirit at work. Not only in spectacular ways, but certainly in discernible ways as we are brought closer to God, enabling us to live as God has called us. In our reading from Acts 19 we hear about those gifts of the Spirit following immediately after baptism. It is not always like that, and we are a church which doesn't depend on obvious manifestations of the Spirit as do many Pentecostal churches. That doesn't mean we don't take the Spirit seriously – we do and we try to get an appropriate balance between the gifts of the Spirit – preaching, prophecy, healing and so on – which may be obvious, and the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace and so on, which may be less obvious but which are equally important in the life of the church and of individual Christians. We receive the Holy Spirit in a way which is right for each person, and that may be something you have to grow into and develop as your faith grows – which is in itself the work of the Spirit in you.

So, in answer to my original question why did Jesus have to be baptised? Two things I think. One is the beginning of the new life totally dedicated to his Father's work and secondly the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Jesus also needed to hear those words of affirmation, and now his ministry could begin.

How does that apply to us? Baptism itself doesn't make anything happen but it is a public statement of our commitment and our intention to follow Christ in the future. Being immersed (or sprinkled) in the water of baptism is important as the symbol of our dying and rising with Christ, and our cleansing from sin. It's all part of that journey by which we come to know Jesus, and in knowing him can make him known to others.

Thanks be to him. Amen.

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