

## **The Baptism of Christ (Matthew 3:13-17)**

*Sermon preached by Andrew Warmback at St Paul's Anglican Church, Durban, on Sunday 12 January.*

### **Introduction: Jesus' baptism and ours**

The baptism of Jesus, which we focused on in today's gospel reading, is a very significant event in Jesus' life. And in looking at Jesus' baptism we also think of our own baptism and its implications for us.

### **Jesus' baptism**

At Christmas we celebrated Jesus' birth; then we focussed on his flight with his family to Egypt to escape death, and then his return, not to his home town, again to avoid danger. Apart from Jesus' time debating in the temple as a young boy, the Bible reveals very little of what happens in the intervening years... until his baptism as an adult.

It's interesting that John the Baptist initially hesitated in baptising Jesus: he recognised Jesus as the more significant person, the one for whom he had been preparing. If anything, he probably thought to himself, *he* should be baptised by Jesus, and not the other way around.

From Jesus' side, it seems he submits himself to be baptised by John to show that his own ministry is a continuation of John's ministry. It may also be that Jesus shows respect or John's ministry - he does not just by pass him and launch out on his own mission.

Another reason why Jesus also undergoes his baptism in the Jordan River, in the wilderness, is, as the scripture says, "to fulfil all righteousness": he undergoes the baptism to do God's will, fulfil God's plan; and he does this at the start of his public ministry.

What is important is what actually happens at Jesus' baptism: the heavens open, there is a dove, and a voice from heaven: "This is my son whom I love, and in whom I am well pleased."

God expresses love for Jesus, saying this is my son, the chosen one, the Messiah. God affirms Jesus' identity and purpose.

And God sends the Spirit to empower Jesus and equip him for service.

### **Our baptism: what do we promise?**

So what about our own baptism?

What do we, or parents/godparents, promise at baptism? In our *Anglican Prayer Book* there are some strong requests made in the questions in the "Renunciation" section of the baptism service. Remember them?

"Do you renounce the devil and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?"

Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy what God have created?"

Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you away from the love of God?"

Strong stuff as I said. What do these things really mean for us?

If we look at the “Renewal of Baptismal Promises,” which we use at St Pauls each Easter morning, the meaning of these renunciations are a bit more specific. For example, the one question we are asked is:

“Do you renounce the wickedness of the world, its greed for possessions, power and status?” and “Do you renounce all that corrupts our human nature, pride, selfishness and lust?”

Here one may think of resisting consumerism, overcoming xenophobia, homophobia and discrimination based on gender, and in fact, discrimination against others on any grounds.

Then in the other main section of the baptism service liturgy– the “Allegiance” - we are asked:

“Do you believe and trust in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit?”

This is a challenge to consider how we can become more trusting of God, with all that we have, with all our lives.

Again, examples of what this may mean are spelt out a bit in the “Renewal of Baptismal Promises,” service; for example, there is the question:

“Will you by your life and witness share in the church’s mission to proclaim the gospel and to set forward peace and justice among all people?”

It is a challenge in our own lives to resist the tendency to resort to violence of any kind in solving conflict, and to find ways of working with others to establish conditions where peace can flourish in our world.

## **Conclusion: The spirit of living out our baptismal promises**

In conclusion I offer you six suggestions, and to myself too, on living out our baptismal promise. I try to capture their essence:

1. Firstly, spend time each day being aware of God’s love for us – like Jesus **we too are each God’s beloved**; let us accept and respect ourselves, including with our weaknesses and failures.
2. As Jesus had a particular vocation – being an instrument of God’s saving work in the world - know too that **God has a particular purpose for each of us**; and that we also receive the Spirit to empower and equip us in fulfilling God’s plan for us.
3. So what does it mean to believe and trust in God the Trinity? **It is to believe and trust in the God of life, and Jesus who came that we may live abundantly**: let us do things which are fun, creative and meaningful; also taking time to rest. **God is to be trusted and is faithful in all things.**
4. **Live with a greater sense of gratitude**; and look for opportunities to share what we have, **giving generously**. Also know that the little that we can do for others can have a very significant impact on them.
5. **Be open to the change this year may bring**; leave the baggage from past year behind; forgive others; live in the moment, be more mindful.
6. Finally, in our baptism we receive God’s grace; and **living by grace means that not everything depends on our own efforts.**

Amen.