

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS YR A

LK 3:15FF./ MT 3:13-17

The source of the river Jordan “lies among the perpetual snows of Mount Hermon (The Lebanon); it issues, evaporating into the tropical heat of the Dead Sea, 1290 feet below sea level, the lowest place on the earth’s surface. When it leaves the lake of Gennesaret it is already 676 feet below sea level, and has sixty eight miles as the crow flies, before it reaches the Dead Sea. Its many twists and turns... make its actual length about 187 miles “ (Clemens Kopp, *The Holy Places of the Gospel*, Edinburgh-London, 1963, p.101). Somewhere along its south course John was baptizing.

Who was the Baptist?

While the Baptist’s importance is universally accepted the detail of his life is virtually unknown. Had it not been for our Gospels history would have forgotten him almost completely. The Gospel writers esteemed the Baptist highly, transmitting the tradition that Jesus had acknowledged his greatness without ever indicating whether they had met personally, except for this encounter. People have speculated as to whether Jesus had been a disciple of the Baptist. The Baptist was never a disciple of Jesus- though some of his own disciples left him to join Jesus. (Jn 1:31f.).

The Baptism of Jesus

‘You are my Beloved Son, my favour rests on you’. Jesus has a unique relationship with the God of Israel. The Beloved Son means in John’s Gospel: he who is near the Father’s heart (Jn 1:18). Nothing could be more intimate. “Philip! He who sees me sees the Father” (Jn 14:9). This is the ultimate epiphany. This is the moment that is presented as decisive for Jesus realising his own vocation and mission. He asked his disciples for their willingness to make his disposition their own. The ambitious sons of Zebedee who wanted a place of glory in his kingdom were asked if they would be ready to accept the baptism with which he and they would be baptized (Mk 10:38). He himself had longed for his passion to be over which he called a baptism (Lk 12:50). He told Peter that when Peter would be old he would be bound and taken where he would not want to go- signifying his death (Jn 21:13). This was after making him the chief shepherd of the flock. Peter we find later bringing Cornelius and with him the gentiles into the Church in today’s second reading (Acts 10:34-38)- referring again to the baptism of John the Baptist.

The Future

Since the beginning of Christianity believers have been trying to live their lives in the way that Jesus lived his; this is called living out one’s baptism. Baptism in the Jordan was Jesus’ public commitment to the values of the Kingdom of God. It was self-dedication to changing the world, in theological technical language ‘to save it’. This meant relief for the suffering, living the truth with sincerity, with openness and goodness, and not just talking about it. The name of this for his followers is conversion. What God wants is made clear in Jesus’ presence in the world. This comes down to a personal change that affects relationships and transforms society. In his Church, with fellow believers, all the baptized commit themselves to the transformation of themselves first of all, and then with all who profess the name of Christ and to live like him in the world. We look around for those who do it the best. Who are the self-giving people who always put others first? By contrast who are those who find their own comfort first and then find a place afterwards for others?

The Baptist is presented in our Gospel as that person of foundational importance who found himself in the presence of someone of greater importance. Jesus does not deny who he himself is, and with his life shows himself as the servant of all (Mk 10:45; Phil 2:6-8). We recite these verses ‘Though he was in the form of God..’ and even sing them-and the converted of heart hear them and translate them into reality. The inspiration comes from Our Lord. ‘I have a baptism with which to be baptized’ (Mk 10:38). He was talking of his death for the principles for which he lived (Mk 10:45). He had washed the feet of his disciples (Jn 13). “Learn of me for I am meek and humble of heart. Then you will have peace” (Mt 11:29). He had seen the self-serving comfortable and ambitious glory-seekers among his own disciples (Mk 10). They had to change. But his flatterers always continue on their self-chosen path. “Not all those who say Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom” (Mt 7:21-2). Jesus called some of these hypocrites. On listening to him the Pharisees must have been horrified at the accusation. But he also said: “When you have done all that is commanded you, say, ‘We are still unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (Lk 17:10 RSV). None of us should have any problem understanding this when we try to take care of those we truly love; we can never do enough for them.

Conclusion

In our families and communities we appreciate once more those who mirror Jesus best. The text from *The Acts of the Apostles* puts its realisation idealistically: “None called anything his own. They shared all things in common” (4:32). Unrealistic, yes, but inspirational too... we are greatly helped by those who strive for such ideals. And how can we possibly live without ideals?

Supported by the example of the splendid people who have helped us and still do, we are encouraged to believe in humanity at its best - the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us. The Baptism of Jesus manifested this. We are here together as a community at prayer to celebrate this - and give each other the sign of peace as commitment to what we share in common. And despite appearances to the contrary, and massive adverse criticism, each local community, and the Church at large, is dedicated to being the presence of Christ in the world: preaching, healing, reconciling- showing people that we really do love them. Happy Feast! Amen.

Rev Richard J. Taylor
Spiritual Advisor , MaterCare
Boarbank Hall, Cumbria, UK