

Baptism of the Lord Year B

Mark 1.7-11

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The gospel writers have a problem with the Baptism of Jesus. It's often argued, when one is considering the gospels as historical documents, that the events we can be most certain of are those which the writers would never in their right minds have mind up. The Baptism of Christ falls into just this category. All four gospels seem to struggle with the person of John the Baptist, because if he baptised Jesus, then surely he must have been in some way superior to Jesus? The story seems to suggest precisely the opposite of that which the gospels were written to proclaim – that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God who comes to bring freedom from sin and death.

Each evangelist deals with the problem differently. We heard this morning from Mark, our earliest account. Mark seems to ignore the problem, saying simply “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and

was baptised in the Jordan by John”. Matthew, probably written second, presents a dialogue: John tries to prevent Jesus, saying “I need to be baptised by you”. But Jesus persists – let it be so for now. Luke almost omits the event, passing over the action with the words “when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying”, and John does in fact omit it completely. Into John the Baptist’s mouth he puts the words which describe what happened – I saw the spirit descend as a dove from heaven, and it remained on him.

But why was Jesus baptised? To answer, we must ask the same question as the gospel writers: who is this Jesus? As Christians centuries later, we give the answer of Christian orthodoxy: this Jesus is the Word made flesh, God come among us, one person both human and divine. But this is the beginning rather than the end of our conversation. The claims of Christian doctrine don’t stand as bald and individual truth claims which we can accept or reject one by one, rather they are the church’s signposts for the journey of faith. The incarnation is an idea, a datum of faith,

but it is also the source of many other ideas, and many other Christian claims.

Christ is God and man. One person, one answer to the question “who”, but two natures, two answers to the question “what”. God and man. Everything that Jesus does must be understood within this framework. Jesus the man needs food to survive, Jesus the son of God is the undying source of all life. There are many such examples. Jesus comes to be baptised as a human being wishing to identify himself with John’s message of repentance. The kingdom of heaven is at hand, he says himself. Turn away from the old ways of sin and selfishness, and believe in the good news of God’s kingdom. Jesus the Son of God is baptised because God the Father wills it. This is the beginning of his ministry, the setting of the Father’s seal on the words and deed which will lead from place to place and person to person until they end in Jerusalem and are nailed to the cross. This is not just another follower of John, this is in fact the one of whom John spoke, the one who will baptise with the holy spirit. No clearer

indication of this could there be than the descent of the Spirit himself upon Jesus, the Father's assurance to the Son that the creative work of God is going on in him.

But this drowning of himself in the river Jordan shows us something else as well, for it prefigures that dying and rising which will be the climax of the tales that the gospels tell. Here the many paradoxes also reach their climax: the Son who incarnates the creative life of God, the one in whom the Spirit dwells, the same Spirit that moved upon the face of the waters before the moment of creation, this outpouring of God's active love is the perfect source of all true life. Yes this source of life begins his work on earth with an action of death, an action of drowning, of dying to the world around him to rise as something else, something God has made him, the first minister of the kingdom itself. Notice that this change of status is only one of appearance. Jesus does not "become" the Son of God at his baptism. He is acclaimed by the heavenly voice as

such, but this is an acclamation of what is already true.

John plays a pivotal role in this drama. He is greater than Jesus in the eyes of the onlookers, the powerful leader and teacher who has set the crowds on fire with his words. He is, in truth, infinitely humbler as he is blessed by his vocation to announce and to aid the ministry of the lamb of God who comes to take away the sin of the world. The question with which the gospel writers are struggling – who is Jesus in relation to John, who is John in relation to Jesus – is a question which, at this stage in the story, cannot be fully answered.

John has a double role – the minister of God’s blessing in baptism, the receiver of God’s blessing as he ministers to God himself. This twofold aspect is the key to answering our earlier question: why was Jesus baptised, and it is a twofold aspect because, as I have said, our answer is rooted in the doctrine of the incarnation. Christ receives baptism as the seal of his

identity, to bless and be blessed by the work of John, to fulfil his human calling as God's servant and to act out his divine mission as God's son. The baptism of Christ is not simply a prefigurement of redemption. It is the beginning of the physical redemption of the world itself. Christ receives baptism by water. He is baptised by the world. But at the same time he is, in fact, baptising the whole world, transforming the physical stuff of creation by identifying himself with it, uniting his own material existence with that of everything which proceeds from God's life giving power. Jesus of Nazareth is blessed by the water, but Jesus Christ blesses the waters of the Jordan, the waters of the whole earth to be set apart for God's purposes, to be used for the baptism of every Christian. The world is being taken by God to be used afresh for his purposes.

This has not been a good week for being humble. The images of power and of violence which have dominated our screens stand in total contrast to the narrative of submission which is played out in the story of the gospels, and in the Baptism of Christ in particular.

The one who incarnates divinity itself, the maker of the heavens and the earth, undergoes baptism for the sake of the very world he made. Nothing could be a clearer image of the divine humility which lies at the heart of every Christian proclamation. Those who wield power and all in authority would do well to pay attention.