

Mark 1:4-11

The Baptism of Christ

This week's sermon by Stuart Vince

What is baptism?



Can you remember when you were baptised? I cannot. As with so many of my generation, I was 'done' when I was a small baby. That is how it was described in the part of the world where I was raised. I can remember my mother talking to a neighbour in whose family there had been a recent birth. They were discussing the new-born baby and I can clearly remember my mother asking the neighbour 'Where are they going to have it done? Will it be C of E or Methodist?' I had to ask my Mum to explain what she was talking about when the neighbour had left. I thought that the baby was being vaccinated as I had just been 'done' for polio at my primary school. It's strange how some conversations come winging back in later years.

I had to state where I had been baptised when I went through the process of applying to be a Reader, and I found the card that had been given my parents that showed I was baptised at a church in Smethwick when I was about 4 months old. In those far-off days, Baptism of the child was used in a similar way to the ceremony that Jesus went through when he was eight days old. Luke (2:21) says 'On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise the child, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.' The ceremony marked the baby as being born a Jew and was the official naming of the child.

Our modern-day equivalent of this ceremony is the baptism of babies and young children. It is sometimes called Christening the baby rather than baptism, and to me this seems to be a more apt name for the ceremony. This suggests the giving of a name to someone or something, or using something for the first time, such as christening a new pair of shoes. The ceremony is an initiation into the Christian faith, a thanksgiving for the gift of life, and a naming ceremony for the baby. It is a bit like the launching ceremony of a ship when the ship is blessed and named, but instead of breaking a bottle on the prow of a ship, we use water to sign a cross on the child as they are named and launched into life.

John baptises Jesus

Today we read about the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John, and we find that we are thinking about something that is completely different in purpose to our service of childhood baptism. It happens as John is carrying out his mission of preaching renewal and the coming of a powerful leader from God to the Jews. John is urging people to 'repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near' (Matt 3:1), that the Jews are like trees that fail to bear fruit and a brood of vipers. (Matt 3:7-12 and Luke 3:7-9). The coming man from God will have his winnowing fork in his hand and will cast the chaff, the sinners, into unquenchable fire (Matt 3:12 and Luke 3:1).

John's baptism was for the repentance of sins (Luke 3:3). His baptism was a symbolic washing away the sins and there had to be a commitment of repentance, of change made by the person being baptised. He foretells than another greater and more powerful than he will come to 'baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire' (Luke 3:16 and Matt 3:11).

Jesus was the person who John said will come with power from God. The gospel of John tells us that John recognises Jesus as the 'Lamb of God' and has seen the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus. The mission that he, John, had been given was completed when Jesus came to be baptised.

Why does Jesus need baptism?

Have you ever wondered why Jesus asked John to baptize him? If Jesus is the son of God how could he have sins that require John's baptism of repentance? When sinners went to John at the river Jordan they did so because they acknowledged their sinfulness, and their baptism symbolised the turning over of a new leaf and their intention of changing how they lived. John recognises that this cannot be the situation with Jesus, the Son of God, and objects and tells Jesus it should be the other way round – Jesus should baptise John (Matt 3:14). Jesus replies that it is 'to fulfil all righteousness' (Matt 3:15).

Jesus seems to be accepting the symbolism within the baptism of John, but the emphasis is different. If Jesus has no sin, is perfectly righteous with God as he is the Son of God, then the sin which the baptism symbolically washes away must be the sin of the world. He took our sins upon his shoulders as he descended into the Jordan, and as he does so he receives the Holy Spirit and the endorsement of who he is from God.

John describes Jesus as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world', (John 1:29). Sacrificial lambs were important in Jewish ritual, and if you remember it was lambs that were sacrificed at the first Passover and their blood smeared on door jambs to protect the Jews from death before they fled Egypt. In saying this, John is foretelling the

sacrifice of Jesus and the blood of Jesus taking away our sins and his blood protecting us from death. On the cross Jesus took our sins onto himself and made us righteous with God. The blood that he shed protects us from death as the blood of the first Passover Lambs protected the Jews.

Jesus talks about his baptism in his ministry and talks about it as something which has not been completed and is the foundation for the road that his life will follow. He says, 'But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed' (Luke 12:50). In Mark he says to his disciples 'Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?' (Mark 10:38).

My baptism now

Did my baptism when I was a baby impact upon my life in a similar way to Jesus' baptism? No, it didn't. When I was confirmed it was more like the baptism of Jesus in that it was me and not my parents who made a considered decision about my faith. Even then my life was not changed immediately. The effects of my commitment in my teens was another stage in the ongoing process of my faith journey. Although making a commitment, looking back I did not open myself to the Holy Spirit. In the way that Jesus talks about his baptism not being complete, so the journey that I started when I was baptised as a baby is an ongoing journey. I have grown closer to Jesus as I have got older. I have accepted that Jesus can change my life and let him do so. If this is the Holy Spirit working within me then I have let the Spirit do its work and welcomed it.

So when was your baptism? How did it change you? Was it part of an ongoing process throughout your life? How could your baptism change you in the future, in this new year?