THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'” 4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." 13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. 16 And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

A Baptism of Non-Conformity

At the heart of today’s reading from Matthew’s gospel is something of a mystery, and it’s a mystery that has puzzled people from John the Baptist himself, to the biblical scholars of our own time. And the mystery is this:

Why does Jesus come to John for baptism?
What was Jesus thinking when he came to John for baptism?
Was it a baptism of repentance for sins committed? If it was, then this is somewhat out of step with the dominant Christian teaching that Jesus was sinless and had no need of repentance?

Was it a baptism of solidarity with sinners, with Jesus simply standing alongside those who did need to repent? Possibly, although it’s not clear why baptism by John is necessary for this, unless it is simply to underline what has already happened at the incarnation.

If this is a question that puzzles modern readers, we can take some comfort from the fact that it also seemed to puzzle John himself. We’re told that John initially tried to prevent Jesus from being baptised, asking instead that Jesus should baptise him. But Jesus argued back by saying, somewhat enigmatically, ‘Let it be so for now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.’ (v.15)

And here we find our first clue, as we begin to grapple with the mystery of Jesus’ baptism. Jesus is baptised by John to ‘fulfil all righteousness’. The Jewish insight was that because God is righteous, so his people are to be righteous in their behaviour. Or, to put it another way, ‘Righteousness’ was considered a visible sign in the life of God’s people, confirming their status as members of God’s covenant community.

How did you know whether you were part of God’s people? You knew because of righteousness. It was a sign of the covenant. So when people departed from righteous living, when they worshipped other gods, or failed to keep the commands of the Lord, they were considered to be breaking the covenant, and the ancient Jewish prophets, such as Elijah, would call them to repentance, to a turning back to righteousness, and to a rediscovery of life lived in covenant relationship with the God of righteousness.

From John the Baptist’s perspective, the society of his day had departed from the covenant; it had lost its focus on righteousness, and needed to turn, to repent, and to start living differently. So the baptism of John was a rallying call for all those who wanted to join him in his rejection of society; it was a baptism of turning away, a baptism of abandonment of the dominant values of his society and religion. It was a baptism that marked a commitment to live life in a very different way from that which the world was demanding.

In the midst of all the pressures to conform, be they ideological pressures, theological pressures, or sociological pressures, John invited people to turn away from an unrighteous society and to turn towards a new way of living. He called them to enter into the life of a new kingdom, where God was once again the focus of existence, and behaviour was determined by obedience to God, not conformity to the status quo.
By this reading, John’s baptism was a radical and non-conformist baptism. It was an outward sign of an inward commitment to rejection of an unrighteous society, and a turning towards an alternative, God-focussed, way of being.

So, when Jesus came to be baptised by John, ‘to fulfil all righteousness’, he was aligning himself with the non-conformist and radical nature of John’s challenge to first century Jewish society. It wasn’t a baptism for the forgiveness of his personal sins, rather, it was an act of public repudiation of conformity. It was a rejection of the compromises by which his inherited religious tradition had entered into its uneasy alliance with the powers that be, and it was an act of commitment to the recovery of the true meaning of the covenant as the in-breaking of God’s justice and righteousness on the earth.

The challenge which John brought to the world of first-century, second Temple Judaism, is a challenge that echoes down the millennia to us as well. It is a relevant challenge to us, because humans, be they first or twenty-first century humans, have a tendency to compromise, a tendency to set aside righteousness, and a tendency to then justify that compromise as necessary, pragmatic, or expedient. ‘It’s just the way the world is’, we tell ourselves. ‘We can’t change it, so we might as well join it’, we say. We conform, and then we try to justify our conformity, as we try to justify ourselves, by making the same move in our own time that John challenged in the first century with his baptism of repentance.

The baptism of Jesus at the hands of John was an expression of his commitment to a radical, non-conformist alternative. Jesus’ baptism was him consciously and publicly aligning himself with the radical revolution of the Kingdom of God, where compromise is rejected, and conformity confounded.

In many ways, in our various traditions, we have lost the political significance of baptism; and yet Jesus’ baptism at the hands of John points to a profoundly and radically politicised act.

Baptism is more than a symbol of our personal forgiveness and of our identification with Christ in his death and resurrection. It is also a sign of our entry into a radical, revolutionary, and counter-cultural lifestyle that rejects the status quo of conformity and yearns, longs, and lives for a world transformed, a world re-imagined, a world reconfigured.

Baptism is the initiatory act of the convicted revolutionaries of the in-breaking kingdom of God. It is a rejection of conformist religion, and it is something people take upon themselves to mark their membership of, and entering into, a radical new way of living.
To be baptised is to be baptised into an alternative kingdom, the kingdom of righteousness and justice. And it’s a kingdom that is coming into being through Christ, the servant who is also the son of God. The emperors of Rome may have claimed the term ‘son of God’ for themselves to legitimate their own rule over the world, but the voice from heaven, the voice of God proclaims Jesus, and Jesus alone, as the legitimate son of God.

The earth is the Lord’s and Jesus is his son, and all other powers and principalities are merely false pretenders. Their claims to divine sonship are illegitimate attempts to assume a throne and a kingdom that does not belong to them.

And so we are back to the political ramifications of the baptism of Jesus in the wilderness. Just as the people of Israel made their exodus from the empire of Egypt through the wilderness to promised land; just as the prophet of the exiles proclaimed the hope of a second exile from Babylon; so Christ, in whom Israel and covenant are fulfilled, initiates the third and final exodus from all the corrupt and evil empires of the world, as people follow Jesus through the waters of baptism into the new world of justice and righteousness that is the kingdom of God.

Jesus not only identifies himself with John’s radical rejection of conformity, but he is proclaimed the personification of Israel, and commissioned as the rightful holder of all power in heaven and on earth. But, and here is the radical theological insight: he holds that power as a servant, not as an emperor. This is where politics and theology collide.

Jesus, the son of God, saves the world not through conquest, but through suffering. He brings new life through death, and hope into the darkness. Because his kingdom is a kingdom of justice and righteousness, and it is breaking in upon the earth as others catch the vision, and join the movement.

And so Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptised by him. And he calls us to follow his example, and to join him in his radical and non-conformist vision for the transformation of the world.

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