

## Epiphany 2, January 12th 2014

St Mary's Kidlington

Revd Felicity Scroggie on *The Baptism of Christ*



### THE PROBLEM

The feast of the baptism of Jesus may give us a few problems if we stop to think about it. If Jesus is sinless why does he need to be baptised? Matthew's gospel shows John the Baptist struggling with this question and trying to put him off. John's gospel says that he saw the Spirit of God descend on Jesus but does not actually say anything at all about being baptised. Christian faith and doctrine is firm that Jesus is like us in all things but sin – he has to be sinless in order to make proper atonement for the sins of the world and reconcile us to God. The book of revelation describes worship in heaven around God's throne and a scroll with heavenly writing sealed with seven seals. Yet no one is worthy to open the seven seals and reveal the Word of God, and John weeps because no one in heaven or earth is worthy, until the Lamb of God (slaughtered lamb (Lamb and flag pub in St Giles)) appears and the heavenly beings fall before the Lamb with songs of 'worthy is the lamb'. He can open the scroll because the innocent sinless one has conquered death. As the hymn says: 'he only could unlock the gate of heaven and let us in'. It's not an accident that John the Baptist points out Jesus with the word 'behold the lamb of God'. It's really important theologically that Jesus is without sin – an innocent lamb.

If, on the other hand, the sinless Jesus has been baptised by John who was preaching a baptism of repentance for sins, people might wonder what he had to be sorry about. Being baptised is ruinous to his reputation – maybe there is something on his conscience? Who was going to believe that eh was there just because he cared? Gossip being what it was, who was not going to think that eh had just a few teeny things to get off his conscience before he went into public ministry?

### JESUS GETS INVOLVED

Imagine the scene: the place was teeming with sinners – faulty, sorry guilty human beings who hoped against hope that John could clean them up and turn their lives around. Some were notorious sinners, some were there for crimes of the heart known only to themselves, but none of them had illusions of their own innocence. They had all responded to John's call to repentance. They knew they were not clean and they had come to be cleansed. And then Jesus showed up and got in line with them. We know very little about Jesus' early life (the Koran has more stories than we do) but it is a basic article of Christian faith and doctrine that Jesus was like us in all things except sin.

Poor John is baffled and in Matthew's account he even tries to talk Jesus out of this:

"What are you doing here? This is no place for you...You already know and live everything I'm preaching on...how can I baptise you?" What was Jesus doing in that crowd of sinners looking and acting like one of them? Like one of us? It IS hard for us to grasp...small wonder that John was confused. It's one thing to help sinners to change, to be a friend to sinners, and a loving helper; it's quite another thing to line up with them and be mistaken for one of them. Jesus could have stood on the shore and encouraged them to be baptised. He could have held out a helping hand as they came out of the water in their heavy wet clothes, or he could even have gone into the water and said to John 'here you have a rest I'll take over for a bit'. All of that would have been entirely understandable to John, and to people through the centuries. But he goes so far beyond that as to line up with them and take his place alongside them. His baptism reveals not only who

he is (my Son the beloved) but also how he works. From his birth to his death he works by being involved with his people, being born as one of us, lining up with us, getting into the water with us, and ultimately doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. This is the lamb of God in action.

We spend a lot of time in the Christian church talking about God's love for sinners and those who are in a mess, but we often pray for 'them' and are careful not to be mistaken for one of them. Jesus does not seem too concerned about that! In him, God's being with us (the essence of the incarnation – Emmanuel – God with us )just means God's being with us in the river with us, in the flesh with us, in the sorrow of repentance with us, and I the joy of new life with us. That is what is going on here. We need to be baptised, cleansed, restored to relationship with God and because we need it he travels that way too.

John is right that Jesus has no NEED of baptism...but Jesus does this, as he does everything else, for our benefit. He identifies fully with every flawed and broken person, each and every sinner who comes to baptism longing for a fresh start, a new identity. Perhaps we should know by now that Jesus will always choose the way of humility...even when he comes to claim his God-given identity. That is the way he is

#### SO THAT BAPTISM BECOMES ABOUT IDENTITY

John's baptism was about repentance but Jesus's baptism revealed / confirmed to him his identity. The voice from heaven said 'you are my Son'. Our gospel passage points to Jesus' identity revealed as he emerges from the waters, but we too receive a fresh identity through our baptism – we are joined to him. It's an identity that transforms how we see our life, our trials, our failures, our wilderness, and finally even our death.

At the Jordan, God affirms his Son in words that only Jesus can hear: and those words are the reason that I specially cherish this scene. This is just the start. Jesus has performed no miracles, preached no awesome sermons. All his public ministry still lies ahead. This is the very beginning and yet God declares This is my Son, the beloved with whom I am well pleased. As God looks on him, so God loves him, totally and unconditionally, from the very beginning. No further action is necessary. There is no requirement to prove himself worthy of love.

And it is the same for us. There is nothing that we can do that will make him love us more, or less. Loving is just what God does. That relationship has always existed...our Baptism and what follows is our response to it, but for God the love he bears us has always been there, always a given reality. So, what happens for Jesus, in that moment that the heavens are opened, is his realisation of the way things are..his recognition of an eternal truth. He is God's child. So are you.

He lined up with the crowds on Jordan's bank and was baptised as they were because he identified with them; people who recognised their need for healing. He was and is the only one who can offer the cleansing and healing we need and bring us back to God; through our baptism we are joined to him and know ourselves in a new way as God's sons and daughters.

This week, quite simply try to remember that you are God's son or daughter and that he loves you with an undying love, and see what difference that makes to how you look at the world and the people around you.

Felicity Scroggie