

The story of Jesus' baptism occurs in all four gospels, which means it must have been very important to the early Christian community. Baptism, as an act of entry into the Christian community, has been a central symbol of the Christian church ever since. And it still is, at least for all the major denominations.

I have been near the site where this event occurred. On a trip from Cairo to Istanbul. We went through Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Turkey. Pretty momentous times in those countries since my visit in the early 2000's. A small group (none of whom I knew before we journeyed together) was making the trip and we were in Jordan and we were told we only had time to visit either the Jordan river where Jesus got baptised or the Dead Sea. I was the only one with a religious interest in visiting this holy site of the baptism of Jesus and the the chance for a swim in the Dead Sea won out. The saltiest lake on earth where you just float. So I just looked at the sign post as our bus whizzed past. Turn off here to see where Jesus got baptised. And so I ended up travelling along much of the border of Israel, but on the "wrong" side. There is a whole sermon in that – to be a disciple a follower of Jesus so often means to view an incident, a relationship, a historic site but from the wrong/different perspective according to the prevailing mentality in our culture.

May seem obvious but we have to say that the baptism that Jesus underwent, while it does have connections to our own baptism is not the same. It is not the same as what the church for the past 2000 years plus has been inviting people to undergo.

In the Hebrew scriptures there are a number of times when prophets call their people to turn back to God, to give up their practices that are an offence to the justice of God, to have a new and clean heart. The prophet John, out in the wilderness at the site of the Jordan River is calling people to a repentance that he saw as the necessary preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The ministry of John is addressed to the people of God who have fallen away, not to outsiders.

Perhaps the closest we may know from our experience is a preacher who preaches to the church a message of come back to what you already know of God's ways. Come to front for prayer and repentance and have your heart and faith renewed. Let's state the obvious one more time. The baptism of Jesus was not an infant rite of passage, as baptism has often become. Judaism did have an infant rite of passage, and Jesus was a Jewish child and the rite of passage was circumcision. The Baptism of Jesus in all four Gospels is associated not with Jesus' birth but with the beginning of his public ministry which the gospel tradition suggests began at about the age of thirty.

John's baptizing movement absolutely daring and radical. John, the prophet in the wilderness, administers a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins and thereby launches a movement which is nothing less than a front on assault upon the established religion of the day. Out in the wilderness – Bethany, on the other side of the Jordan. In Jordan the country. Established religious practice said it was only in the Temple, through priesthood and sacrifice, that

atonement could be made. Moreover, to tell those within the covenant that they were dirty and needed washing struck at the root of all that religion stood for. It was the Gentiles who were dirty; tax collectors and sinners were dirty; but not the people of Temple and Law - they were clean.

Jesus associates himself with all this and goes further. He participates in it. John was clearly unhappy with that and Christians have ever since been discussing what it meant and why Jesus would be baptized if indeed he was the sinless spotless one; "the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world

The gospels do not tell us in so many words why Jesus was baptized, but surely it must be something about Jesus the fully human one, standing in solidarity with our crumpled, broken and bleeding humanity. Choosing not to avert his eyes from us choosing not to despise our frail flesh, but taking the plunge, in order that his life of compassion may be lived for us, to redeem our fallenness. Now when we baptize someone, we often talk about them being baptized into the life of Jesus the fully human life that has appeared and strode our earth.

And of course it was also the confirmation for Jesus that the way he was setting himself upon was the godly way, this way of suffering love. The Dove and the Voice appear to strengthen Jesus. The Voice of blessing and affirmation is particularly powerful in this story. And particularly needed by us today. Some people have internal voices that tell them that they are no good, that they are a problem, that they are a burden, that they are a failure. They hear a voice that keeps saying, "If you want to be loved, you had better prove that you are worth loving. You must show it." And because that is so hard and because they do not believe they are loveable they get into all sorts of self destructive and self sabotaging behaviour.

And then we get taste of John's apocalyptic preaching. The winnowing fork is in his hand to clear the threshing floor and separate the wheat and the chaff. For John the winnowing fork is as much a part of baptism as is the font for us today. I think for us it's more helpful to not think that some people are wheat and others are chaff. The line that separates good from evil is not a line that goes around people but through each and every one of us. No, we all have both in our lives. I have wheat in my life and I have chaff in my life.

The separation of wheat and chaff may call us upon to make some necessary and hard judgment calls. It is not always so simple and clearcut as a judgment between good and bad. Perhaps even more often is it's the discernment between what grows and feeds life and what does not. Wheat is edible and digestible, chaff is not. Wheat nourishes and feeds life, chaff does not. But the wheat needs the chaff, until it doesn't. The chaff is not inherently bad or wrong. It serves a purpose. It's the outer husk or casing that protects the wheat. Without the chaff the wheat could not survive but at some point the chaff no longer serves a purpose. Instead, it restricts the wheat and gets in the way.

Haven't you experienced that in your life? Haven't there been things – patterns, habits, behaviors, attitudes – that at one time in your life served,

protected, or nurtured your life but now they only diminish or constrict your life? They don't offer you anything. They don't work like they used to.

**Baptism calls us to a new way, one where the destructive ways, and behaviours and self thinking have no place but have been put to death in order that the new self may arise, blessed by Christ, indwelt by Christ. Baptism plunges us into the life of Jesus and in that life you gradually learn to listen to a voice that says something else, that says, "You are the beloved and on you my favour rests."**

**You are the beloved and on you my favour rests. It is not a very loud voice because it is an intimate voice. It comes from a very deep place. It is soft and gentle. Hear that voice and claim for yourself that this voice speaks the truth, . It tells us who we are. That is where the spiritual life starts -- in baptism and by claiming the voice that calls us the beloved.**