

2016-01-10 Sue Diggory
Epiphany 1- The Baptism of Christ
'A Tale of Two Baptisms'

Luke 3 15 – 17 and 21 - 22

Today we have a tale of two baptisms – one just with water and one with the added ingredient of the Holy Spirit, an ingredient that made and makes all the difference to the life changing experience of baptism.

The opening verses of our Gospel reading today are the third and final portion of John the Baptist's message to the people. John had been preaching in the lands around the Jordan about the need for the people to repent, to change their ways, to open their hearts and to 'get ready.'

He had been making it very clear that just because they were Jews, children of Abraham, this did not mean that they were exempt from the need to repent and to live in a way that was pleasing to God, and to the 'what should we do question' John made it clear that living in an honest and servant and open hearted way was vital, along that is with the need for repentance; *'whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none ... whoever has food must do likewise... collect no more [money] than the amount prescribed for you ... be satisfied with your wages.'*

So not surprisingly the people were beginning to wonder, to wonder if John was indeed the long expected Christ. We of course know the answer as we can look through the spectacles of hind-site but, but those were not available to the crowds who flocked to the banks of the Jordan River that day, when growing Messianic expectation was filling the air.

And so we come to today's Gospel reading, which contains Luke's account of Jesus' baptism. *'I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'*

John is very clear that both he and his baptism are inferior to the one who is to come; the Messiah, and to the baptism he will bring. It was common practice at this time for the followers of a rabbi, or teacher serve them as a servant or slave would, that is except in the task of removing or loosing his sandals. This was considered a step too far, a task too menial for a follower or disciple and was reserved for the lowest servant in the household. So here we see John showing great humility as he tells the crowds that he is so inferior to the coming Messiah, that he is so unworthy, that he is not able even to perform the most menial of tasks for him, he is less than the lowest servant or slave.

Secondly he speaks about baptism, and here he is equally humble. His baptism by water is simply a baptism of repentance, a washing or cleansing, a getting ready baptism, whereas the baptism of the one *'who is more powerful,'* the coming Messiah, the one we know to be

Jesus, is a baptism not only of water for repentance but also of the Holy Spirit and fire, it is complete and all that is needed for salvation, all that is needed to repair the damaged relationship that existed between God and his people.

John is making it clear that those who accept this baptism will be strengthened by the Spirit, as well as being purified by fire. The Spirit and fire, or wind and fire as it can also be translated, are both symbols for the Holy Spirit and the powerful presence of God as we see at the day of Pentecost, but also of God's judgment.

Here John uses the motif of the farmer who through the winnowing process, as he tosses the wheat into the air on a windy day, the chaff would have been blown away and the clean grain would fall to the threshing floor. This would have been a well known process to those gathered that day, and although the burning of the chaff is a reference to judgment, they would have realized that the emphasis of winnowing was on the gathering of the wheat and not the burning of the chaff, on the gathering of all into the kingdom and not on those who like chaff who were left on the outside. So John concludes this final 'pointing to the Messiah,' with this thumbnail sketch of how they will recognize who the real Messiah is, and the stage is set for the second of our two baptism tales.

But first I suggest we must ask the question, why?

Why did Jesus come to John for baptism?

Why did Jesus choose to undergo a baptism that was for repentance of sins when he of course was sinless?

By choosing to undergo John's water baptism Jesus is fully identifying himself with humanity's sin as he takes his place among the 'sinner's; those he came to save, among those like you and me, and he is also identifying himself with the message and ministry of John the Baptist. As he submits to John's washing he is in effect saying to the people, the message is true, you need to get ready, you need to be prepared to receive salvation, salvation that will come through me. But of course his baptism was very different to those he stood alongside that day down by the Jordan, as it involved more than murky Jordan water, and having been to the 'supposed', site of Christ's Baptism, I can assure you the water is very murky indeed!

'Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven,

Immediately after Jesus arises from the water, but is still praying we see that several unusual things happen. The heavens open, the Spirit descends and God speaks!

Luke tells us that the Spirit descends like a dove, and we have this amazing moment when we see Father and Son in communion through prayer, as the Son is enfolded by the presence of the Spirit, followed by that wonderful endorsement of the Son by the Father

'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased,' as Jesus is anointed by the Spirit for his future ministry.

So should we leave this story there, knowing that Jesus is now on the cusp of his public ministry or should pause to see what we can take from it into our 21st century lives apart from the knowledge that through our baptism we have not only been washed clean of our sins, but have been anointed by the Spirit for ministry as the words 'I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of Son, and of the Holy Spirit' were said over us at some point in our lives when we were brought to baptism, and if they haven't been and you want to explore this more do talk to be!

John is very clear that baptism requires a turning and opening of the heart, and we know that it is a turning and opening of our hearts to Christ, and that should make a daily difference to the way we live our lives.

Are we people who are prepared and willing to open our hearts to Christ on a daily basis?

Are we as John exhorted the people on the banks of the Jordan that day people who if we have *'two coats'* are prepared *'share with anyone who has none'* and if we have *'food'* are prepared to do like wise? We only have to look at the plight of refugees in Europe and the growing needs of the poor in our own country to come face to face with that challenge.

If we look to Jesus' own baptism, we see that it was he while he was praying that the Holy Spirit descended upon him.

Are we prepared to be people of prayer, who like Jesus are prepared to spend time apart with God at the important and critical moments of our lives?

And do we have the expectation that although we may not hear the voice of the Father, or see the Spirit descend as a dove, we are able to come with the very real expectation that we will if we are prepared to persevere in prayer experience the guiding hand of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit at work each day in our lives.

Amen.