

I have attended a lot of graduation ceremonies! 2 or 3 of my own. 5 so far among the daughters with maybe a 6<sup>th</sup> in prospect. And a countless number sitting on the stage as the duty chaplain at Napier University graduations – in the days when the University actually recognised the value of such a thing. The ceremonies have all varied widely from place to place, institution to institution. In addition to Napier I have been to Edinburgh, Geneva, Hamilton, Lancaster, Leeds, Strathclyde and Aberdeen. Some have been highly formal, with lots of Latin. Some have been very laid back in a folksy kind of way.

But the common element is always the sense of achievement and pride – achievement on the part of the students, pride on the part of the parents. You can almost feel that sense in the air – “see that young man there? See that young woman? She is ours – he is very special!”

Over the years I have conducted quite a few baptisms – I have even by now married some that I baptised. But every baptism has that same feeling about it. Whatever else, at that moment the parents standing by are bursting with that same sense of proprietorship! “This one is ours!”

And this morning’s gospel suggests something of the same.

Listen again to the story. We really have no idea what Jesus did during his boyhood. What we do know is that in his late twenties Jesus left his family in Nazareth and went of searching for his rather eccentric cousin John. There are all kinds of theories about that. Was John part of the sect known as the Essenes who lived in and around the desert and were very anti- the temple in Jerusalem? And if so is it possible that Jesus himself became an Essene? At any rate we would have to describe John as a prophet of radical dissent; his detractors said that he was possessed by a demon – that he was in fact mad.

John’s father was a priest in the Temple at Jerusalem. So it was all the more surprising that John fled the comforts and corruptions of the city for the loneliness of the desert, where he dressed in animal skins and ate insects and wild honey. Living on the edges of society, both literally and figuratively, he preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. “Repent” he called, “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” The gospels say that the people flocked into the desert to hear this wild radical who preached sedition.

What happened, of course, was that John’s preaching came into direct conflict with the religious and political powers of the day. Rome, of course, but most noticeably Herod – the Roman puppet ruler of Jerusalem. John preached against Herod for sleeping with his brother’s wife – and John got put in the dungeons. Art and music through the ages have reproduced the graphic tale of how Salome danced for Herod and then asked for the head of John the Baptist as a reward.

The religious authorities in the temple were pleased to see him go too. They made a business of selling God’s forgiveness to the people. And when John started preaching it for free – then that was a serious challenge to their power and their pockets. John called them a “brood of vipers”! Wonderful! Later Jesus would point out that the religious leaders had ignored John’s call to repentance, and as a result had rejected God’s purpose.

John, then, led a movement of protest and a message that would bring down the establishment. And that is the movement Jesus joined. “When all the people were being baptized, Jesus was baptized too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove.”

And then we have it! That baptism moment we have all seen. That graduation moment. The heavens open and a voice comes from heaven: “You are my beloved son! With you I am well pleased.”

This moment changed Jesus' life in practical terms. He was stepping right outside convention. From that time on even his own family were unsure of him. He was identified with this madman – and in his home village of Nazareth they thought of Jesus in the same way. A dangerous lunatic!

The baptism of Jesus causes quite a lot of debate among biblical scholars and theologians. Did Jesus “need” to get baptised? Was it necessary for Jesus to repent of his sins? The question seems to go right back to the beginning – because when we read the story the way that Matthew tells it it is clear that John himself is uncomfortable about the whole thing. “Why do you come to me? It is more likely that I should be getting baptised by you!” And a hundred years after that – there was another gospel in existence – a lost gospel used among the Hebrew Christians from which we now only have quotes available. And this so called “Gospel of the Hebrews” has this addition to the story:

Behold the mother of the Lord and his brothers said to him, "John the Baptist baptizes for the forgiveness of sins. Let us go and be baptized by him." But Jesus said to them, "in what way have I sinned that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless perhaps, what I have just said is a sin of ignorance".<sup>1</sup>

So did he need to? Did he do it as an example to us? Or did he do it to please his mother?

Whatever the answer to that might be – I think it is pretty likely that Jesus here was identifying in the most intimate way possible with all those people who had brought their failures, their secret faults, and their heartbreaks to the River Jordan. By choosing to join them in being baptised, Jesus is being with us in our deepest need. This is an act of identity. Jesus – “Emmanuel” as we have just said and sung for many weeks – “God with us”. And this is what it means!

In the traditions, baptism is described as a “visible sign of invisible grace”. This grace of God is what keeps us going from day to day – and our baptism is the reminder of it. Martin Luther once wrote:

*To put it most simply, the power, effect, benefit, fruit, and purpose of Baptism is to save. No one is baptized in order to become a prince, but as the words say, to “be saved”. To be saved, we know, is nothing else than to be delivered from sin, death, and the devil and to enter into the kingdom of Christ and live with him forever.*<sup>2</sup>

We know that Luther often suffered from great bouts of feeling unworthy and in despair. This image of baptism having saved him was so strong for him that he would often touch his forehead and say: “Remember, Martin, you have been baptised!” He claimed to have told the Devil the same thing!<sup>3</sup>

And when Jesus did this – for us – and acted out the sign of God’s mercy and grace for the ordinary hurting people around him.... when he stood out against the authority of the temple and said that God’s love had drawn so close.... Then we hear God’s proud voice. “That’s my Son – there – and I am pleased.”

Still dripping from the waters of Jordan – Jesus hears God’s voice. And in that moment we know that this is indeed God’s coming kingdom to which, by grace, we belong. This is God’s kingdom – where all are welcome. Whatever they are! Whatever they have done! Whatever we are! Whatever we have done! God welcomes us with mercy and with joy.

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome's Commentary on Isaiah 4

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther – The Large Catechism 1529

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.lca.org.au/resources/webmanager/quotesluther1.pdf>