The baptism of our Lord

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The baptism of our Lord: Isa 43 1-7 Ps 29 Acts 8 14-17 Lk 3 15-22

Imagine we were going to write a handbook for a Messiah. "Purpose Statement: *You have three years to transform the world from its present trajectory down the drain and set us on course for a new and eternal hope for life in all its fulness.*" How would you suggest this person begin the task? Current wisdom advises you start with a bang: fireworks and fanfare, a huge display of power and importance, maybe a military parade, some feel-good presentations of our art and culture – put our civilization's depth and greatness on show; that'll get the message out there!

But no; today we see Jesus join the masses – people who almost certainly didn't feel good about themselves; who knew their faults but didn't know what to do about them; who greeted any illness with the fear that it might be their last; who experienced life as broken and painful; who felt cut off from God – like lots of us, really. Jesus was born one of us, and didn't stop there.

This is why he went to John to be baptised; to join with the crowds of people who went down from Jerusalem and Judea to cross the Jordan River and receive John's baptism of repentance; a baptism which enabled them to turn back to life within the relationship God meant to have with them.

There's a pattern in the Gospels of Jesus leaving the land in solidarity with outsiders. The first time is soon after his birth when he has to go to Egypt as a refugee. The next time is the event we honour today; his baptism. And then during the years of his ministry we read of him travelling to the other side of Lake Galilee, and going north into Lebanon. Each time,

we find him together with outsiders.

Of all people, Jesus didn't need a baptism of repentance. Ever since the early Church Fathers and Mothers, we've puzzled over Jesus receiving John's baptism. In their reflections on this paradox of the perfect penitent, our forebears came up with important wisdom that's always worth looking at again. Let's journey with these early Christians as our guides. Cf *Ancient Xtian Commentary on Scripture NT 1a*; IVP 2001, pp. 49ff

One anonymous Church Father or Mother wrote that in receiving John's baptism, Jesus endorsed John's teaching and practice. John knew God's people *do* need to leave behind the parts of our lives that separate us from God and turn back to God. The way we're given to do this is to imitate Jesus and receive baptism. We've been privileged to witness the astonishing power of this here with our Persian families who've risked their lives to receive baptism. And those among us who've received baptism as adults or confirmation can also attest to its transformative power.

St Jerome saw three reasons for Jesus receiving John's baptism. "First, because he was born a mortal, that he might fulfil all justice and humility of the law. *(Jesus is born and lives his solidarity with us and by grace offers us a salvation we cannot earn.)* Second, that by his baptism, he might confirm John's baptism. And third, that by sanctifying the waters of the Jordan through the descent of the dove, he might show the Holy Spirit's advent in the baptism of believers." P.51 citing CCL 77:18-19 (*This means our life is transformed from our baptism; a life limited by our biology becomes a life empowered for eternity by the breath of God – new, eternal life which doesn't have to wait until we die before it starts* See Tom Wright *Surprised by Hope* SPCK 2007 p.168)

The Assyrian Bishop, Theodore of Mopsuestia wrote that in receiving baptism, Jesus "identified himself with that part of

society outside the law of grace, in which we also take part. The Lord became … like a common person from among the people." MKGK 101 in ACCS p.51 Bishop Theodore sees Jesus joins the queue with people just like us who head down to the river looking for a new start and guidance for the way ahead. You can really trust someone who'll do that with you.

Bishop Cromatius of Constance wrote that "the Lord did not want to be baptised for his own sake but for ours…" CCL 9a: 244-45 in ACCS p.51. This sounds very like the reason for Jesus's crucifixion. We know that Jesus died for us so that we might be ransomed from the power of evil. Bp Cromatius realised that Jesus received baptism for this too. His baptism was in direct continuity with his self-sacrifice on the Cross.

Abp John Chrysostom of Constantinople saw it similarly to Bishop Cromatius. Chrysostom wrote that Jesus meant, "I have come to do away with the curse that is appointed for the transgression of the law. So I must first therefore fulfil it, and having delivered you from its condemnation, bring it to an end. … This is the very purpose of my assuming flesh and coming to you." *Matthew, Homily 12.1 PG* 57.203 in ACCS p.52-3. So Chrysostom is also linking Jesus's baptism with his birth and his crucifixion.

What are *we* to make of all this – the Baptism of our Lord?

I think we can answer that by expanding on that last teaching of Abp Chrysostom – the linking of Jesus's birth, baptism and crucifixion.

Jesus didn't go to John for Baptism because he needed it. He didn't receive John's baptism to re-connect himself with God. Jesus received John's baptism to re-connect ***us*** with God. *His receiving baptism transforms the baptism we receive.* It's the same reason he came among us, born as the child of Bethlehem we welcomed at Christmas. Jesus was born so that any born on

Earth might know we are all God's children too. *His being born transforms all births.* It's the same reason he lived the servant-life of gracious, beautiful, healing love that he did. Jesus lived that life so we might have a model before us of the freedom there is in choosing a life of self-offering and love. *His choice to live a mortal life has transformed all life.*

We need to be baptised; we need to know we are God's children; we need to know the joyful freedom of a life of loving service. It's all there before us in the life of Jesus, and it's also there in his death. We see him on the Cross; Jesus again in our place. And we see him taking on himself the pain of everything that separates us from God; cruelty, deceit, fear, pride, injustice, selfish rage, greed, death. And we see these divisive powers all destroy themselves in their attempt to destroy him. As we rise with him from the waters of baptism, we remember that he rises again from death, and we will too. We know too that because of the grace, humility and love of Jesus, nothing can ever separate us from the Love of God. Amen