

The theme is: - The Baptism of Jesus.

Verse 4 starts, “John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness,” that raises a question of why start in the wilderness to proclaim his message, why not go to the city, where people live? There are many answers to that question, firstly the wilderness had, and still has a special meaning to the Jewish people, much more than any city, even Jerusalem, and of course the river Jordan was an ideal place for total emersion. It was to freedom in the wilderness that God, through Moses, led the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt to the promised land, and it was in their time of forty years in the wilderness that God formed, or moulded, them into a nation. And even more importantly it was where Elijah was carried up to heaven in a whirlwind, just after he had crossed the Jordan, see 2 Kings chapter 2 verse 11. And now it is at the Jordan where John the Baptist emerges from the desert clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, somewhat reminiscent of Elijah. Elijah is described as a hairy man, with a leather belt around his waist, see 2 Kings chapter 1 verse 8. Indeed, scripture promised the return of Elijah, in Malachi Chapter 4 verse 5 where we read, “Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes.” And Jesus confirmed that John was Elijah, see Matthew 17:12 and 13 which reads, “But I tell you Elijah has already come,” and Matthew continued, “Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist.”

That’s why they came from the whole Judean countryside and from Jerusalem verse 5, because they knew that a great prophet had returned through John the Baptist, proclaiming the arrival of the Lord. Also, it had been more than three hundred years since a prophet was active in Israel, and the people had begun to think that the age of prophets was past, but then they heard of a present day prophet, which was another reason they flocked to see him.

I want now to turn our attention to Jesus’ Baptism, in Greek our word baptism means, ‘the process of immersion, or submersion,’ so Jesus’ baptism was probably total immersion in the river Jordan. In John the Baptist’s day baptism, or ritual washing by full immersion, was normally only carried out on Gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism and become members of the people of God. So, it would seem that John had borrowed baptism by full emersion, not to baptise Gentiles into the Jewish faith but to baptise Jews for the forgiveness of their sins, that is assuming that all the people who came were Jews, which the text suggests, so that they would be ready for Christ’s coming. We are told in the second half of verse 4 that John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, but that must have been a huge precis of the impact his teaching had, to have persuaded Jews to be baptised, and to be baptised for the forgiveness of their sins. Because in effect John was telling the Jews that they were in need of God’s forgiveness. In that, they were no different or better than Gentiles. John baptized them to prepare them for the day when God would come in judgment.

We tend to think of repentance as feeling guilty about our sins, which of course it is, but it is much more than that, it means a change of mind or change of direction, both in the way we behave and in our relationship with God, change is essential if we are to grow in faith.

In verse 7 we read, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me.” John has been the subject of all their wonder, but he knew that he was only the messenger, so he redirects their attention on the one who is coming and makes it clear that the one who is coming is more powerful than he. John then tells them, “I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals.” The task of untying someone else’s sandals was considered so menial that all Jews, even Jewish slaves, were exempt from such duty; only Gentile slaves would be required to perform such a service. When John said that he was unworthy to untie the thong of the sandals of the one who was to follow, he was saying that the social distance between him and the one who was to come was greater than that between a master and a Gentile slave. The point was not John’s insignificance, but Jesus’ overwhelming significance.

Verse 8 contrasts John’s action of baptising with water, with that of Jesus’s baptising which will be with the Holy Spirit. There is no record of Jesus actually baptising any individual, however, and more importantly, Jesus promises us the Holy Spirit; in John 14 verses 15, 16 and 17 Jesus said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command. “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another counsellor to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth.” And Jesus’ last command, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

In verse 9 we have the very moment that Jesus was baptised by John in the river Jordan by total emersion. We are told that Jesus came up from Nazareth to the river Jordan a distance of about 20 miles, almost a day’s journey so it may have been late afternoon when he arrived.

The big question people ask, and I have also asked the same question many times in the past, ‘why did Jesus need to be baptised?’ Jesus was and is without sin so why baptise him?

Firstly, Mark does not say that Jesus was baptised for the forgiveness of his sins, only that he was baptised, so why baptise him? Each of the four Gospels includes an account of Jesus’ baptism. Mark’s account is the earliest, and Matthew and Luke both use Mark as one of their sources. The purpose of Jesus’ baptism, in Mark’s Gospel, was to establish beyond doubt Jesus’ identity as the Son of God. Verses 10-11, which tells of Jesus’ vision of a dove, and the voice from heaven, constitutes the core of Jesus’ baptism, so let us look at verses 10 and 11 in more detail.

Verse 10 reads, “He, that is Jesus, saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him.” Which strongly suggests that only Jesus saw the dove descending

on him. And in verse 11 it was only Jesus who heard the voice of God from heaven who said, “You are my Son, the beloved; with you I am well pleased.” It was only Jesus who saw the heavens torn apart at his baptism and it was only Jesus who heard God’s words. We cannot know for sure the extent to which Jesus understood his unique status as the Son of God prior to his baptism, but those actions and words from heaven would have removed any ambiguity from his mind. Those signs, the rent heavens, the descent of the Spirit, and the voice, make it clear that Jesus was not just another prophet, but was God’s Son in a way that others created in God’s image are not.

So how do we know what happened at Jesus’ baptism and how do we know what he saw, if no one else saw or heard any of the things which happened at his baptism. We know because God has told us through Mark, because God revealed it to Mark who faithfully wrote it down, which is true for all the books of the Bible, which is why the Bible is sacred scripture.

Jesus’ relationship to God was confirmed at his baptism, and although we are told that Jesus is the Son of God at the beginning of Mark’s gospel, we need to read on to the end, to get a clearer understanding of what that means, and of our relationship to God through Christ. The Spirit of God was the controlling, empowering force behind Jesus’ ministry and life, and it is the same Spirit of God sent to us after Jesus’ death and resurrection that enables us to read and understand the Bible and to have faith and trust in Christ.

Also, interestingly we have in verses 10 and 11 the three persons of God, since we have Jesus with the Holy Spirit descending on him and God the Father saying that Jesus is his Son.

Finally, God said to Jesus, “You are my Son, the beloved; in you I am well pleased,” This raises an interesting question, which is, how do we please God? For the answer to that question, I draw on my experience as a father of three children, who do please me, and I realise that primarily they please me because they keep in touch. We talk to each other, either by a visit or by phone and these days by WhatsApp or by Zoom, because my three are in Cheltenham, Leicester, and Dubai. And because they keep in touch with me I keep in touch with them, and that is how I please them and they please me, and God is the same, if we keep in touch with God, God will keep in touch with us. In 1 Chronicle 16 verse 11 we read, “Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his presence continually.” That’s how we please God, and the more we focus our minds and hearts on God the more we will be transformed into the person that God designed us to be.

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