

The Baptism of Jesus

Isaiah 42:1-9

Matthew 3:13-17

To the best of our knowledge, until the age of thirty Jesus was no more than a village carpenter, in a tiny community, well away from any of the main trade routes. Given the nature of village life it is reasonable to suppose that he also learned how to tend the land and care for animals.

But is hard to imagine that his mother was not frustrated. Promises had been made to her, many years ago, and by an angel, about who her son was to be and by the time Jesus was twenty Mary might reasonably have expected him to show some initiative, some desire to achieve his potential. By the time Jesus was thirty he was middle aged by the standards of the time and he seemed quite determined to wait. It could have been seen as idleness, cowardice, indecision. Perhaps there were people around who were ready to accuse him of any of these vices. Perhaps his own conscience did. But with hindsight we can see the waiting as an act of faith, so beautifully described by the Psalmist:

I have stilled and quieted my soul
Like a weaned child on its mother's breast. Ps 131:3

And then Jesus acts. Matthew gives no explanation. He tells us quite bluntly,

Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan
to be baptized by him. Matthew 3:13

John was baptizing in the River Jordan, close to Jerusalem. The journey from Nazareth to Jerusalem would have been well travelled by Jesus and his family on pilgrimage at Passover time. But all the same it was the best part of a week's journey and on the assumption that he intended to spend some time in the south he would have been away from home three weeks at least. There would have been arrangement to make – people to tend the crops, more importantly feed the animals, orders for carpentry completed. This was no spur of the moment decision.

Nor is there any indication why Jesus left. No doubt he had heard of the new ministry of this strange man, John. Perhaps John's mother, Elizabeth had written to her cousin Mary. Mary may have been anxious for Jesus, because John was a man who used violent and even abusive language, who confronted evil and challenged authority. He was the kind of man who could get himself – and his followers - into trouble. That was the man Jesus was drawn to. Perhaps it was a similar idealistic response to that which led many British men in the 1930s to fight in the Spanish Civil War; or in our own time to fight in Syria.

But whatever anxiety Mary may have had, Jesus went. He knew his own mind. Just as when he was twelve and in the Temple he knew where he had to be – although perhaps the man of thirty was more gracious than the youth of twelve.

And perhaps there were others of the same mind and so perhaps the journey south assumed the same feeling as the Passover pilgrimage. They would have shared conversations about who this man John was and why they all felt drawn to him. For Jesus this journey would have momentous consequences: it is hard to imagine that as he walked and talked he realized just how momentous.

Despite their mothers being cousins there is no evidence that Jesus and John had ever met before this day: in fact John's gospel records that John the Baptist clearly said that he had never met Jesus.

Matthew gives us little detail about the meeting. We do know that there were crowds seeking baptism so it is not hard to imagine that before Jesus went into the water he would have had the time and the opportunity to watch, to reflect on what he saw: what was going on? What did it all mean? John was family. Jesus would have heard of him from his mother. But what should he make of him in the flesh? He would have had no problem with the call to repent. Some of the language was familiar from the scriptures - talk of one with a winnowed fork and the baptism of fire. (Matthew 3:11 and 12; Isaiah 41:16 and Jeremiah 15:7) John's strange dress recalls that of the prophet Elijah who was to return at the end of time. (Malachi 3:23) But perhaps Jesus might have been less sure about the insults to the religious leaders – people who had

nurtured Jesus since the age of twelve, the people whom he most wanted to be with when he was just twelve years old. Perhaps the turning point comes when John refers to the need to bear fruit and not presuming on an inheritance from Abraham. (Matthew 3:8) Over the years Jesus has come to the same conclusion (see John 8:33 Matthew 7:15) and these themes will be present in his own preaching. Jesus now knows that John speaks from God. Jesus wants to be his disciple. He enters the water.

No doubt he introduces himself:

Hello my name is Jesus, from Nazareth.
Our mothers are cousins.

But John's reply takes his breath away:

I need to be baptized by you. Matthew 3:14

He had not expected this. His request for baptism was quite genuine. So he mutters a reply about this being the right thing to do and John gives way and baptizes him. But what happens next is equally unsettling – the dove and the voice from heaven. The words he hears

This is my Son, the beloved

are the words of the psalmist to King David. (Psalm 2:7) Is he a new King David? The Messiah? Perhaps in his childhood there were many overheard conversations, particularly involving his mother; many hints. None of them made sense at the time – but suddenly they are beginning to fall into place. The Church briefly entertained the idea that Jesus became God's son at his Baptism. We have long rejected that view. But perhaps it was at his baptism that he began to understand the reality of who he was. And so he was ready, spiritually for the next stage of his journey – temptation by the devil.

Few of us have chosen baptism for ourselves, as Jesus did. But many will have chosen it for our children. Perhaps like Jesus we were only dimly aware of what it means, of what it might lead to. I am quite certain that none of us heard the words

This is my son the beloved.
My favour rests on him

Matthew 3:17

But they were spoken at the baptism of each of us and they are true. We are sons and daughters of God. Like Jesus, like Isaiah's Suffering Servant we are called

to be a covenant to the people,
to be a light to the nations,
to open the eyes that are blind,
to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon,
from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Isaiah 42:6-7

If you have never known that truth, perhaps today is the day when you make that amazing discovery. But if you have known it for many years perhaps today is the day when you rediscover it, reaffirm it and rejoice.

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