

Sunday 12 January 2014 – first after Epiphany; Baptism of the Lord
Readings: Isaiah 42:1-9, Psalm 29, Acts 10:34-43, Matthew 3:13-17

There is a hymn I didn't have today, based on a poem by Howard Thurman:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
 To find the lost,
 To heal the broken,
 To feed the hungry,
 To release the prisoner,
 To rebuild the nations,
 To bring peace among people,
 To make music in the heart.

Christmas is over – and now the work begins. And so in Matthew we read the account of what happened next – the account of Jesus' baptism. This is Jesus' first action as Matthew records it – when Jesus came from Galilee to John in the Jordan to be baptised.

Baptism was one of the steps that a Gentile proselyte took to become a Jew. For Jews, ritual washing was part of their religious observance, signifying the need to be clean as they came to worship God. But when John came to the Jordan and began to baptise, he was calling not Gentiles but Jews to be baptised as a sign of their repentance, a sign of a change of heart and mind, a change of direction and purpose. And Matthew tells us, John's baptising was also a sign of preparation, preparation for the new thing God was about to do: “prepare the way of the Lord: make his path straight.”

Jesus came to John in the Jordan to be baptised. He came, identifying with the new thing God was about to do, identifying himself with people who needed to turn around and turn back to God. John recognised Jesus, recognised that here was someone who had no need of baptism, who already was totally committed to God, who was already following God's way, who didn't need to turn around or turn back. John recognised that here was one to whom he should be submitting, one to whom he should come for baptism. So why did Jesus come to John, and submit to John's baptism?

Jesus said (the first words he speaks in this gospel) “Let it be so now: for it is proper/appropriate for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness – to do all that God requires.”

Jesus says: this is the right thing to be doing, the thing that God requires. It is right for me to receive baptism, in solidarity with all those who need to turn to God, and who need to receive God's love and grace. I am not above them or against them but alongside them – Emmanuel: God with us.

Part of what is going on here is the continuation of Matthew's theme, declaring “This is the new Moses and the new Israel”. Moses led the people of Israel through the waters of the Red Sea out of slavery in Egypt, and then Joshua led the people across the Jordan to enter the promised land. And here it is happening again. Jesus' entry into the river recalled these early stories of the people of Israel. In solidarity with the people, Jesus stood in line with sinners. Jesus went with the people into the waters of the Jordan, identifying with sinners rather than condemning them.

And in doing this, he fulfilled all righteousness, did all that God required, as he identified with sinners as he served them in all his living, and in his dying. (As he says later in the gospel: The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many¹)

Jesus came to be baptised, and as he came up from the water – the heavens opened; the Spirit descended; the voice from heaven spoke. Do you hear the echoes from Genesis 1, when the Spirit hovered over the

¹ Matthew 20:28

waters, bringing order out of chaos, when the voice spoke “Let there be” and there was creation. As in the beginning, so now. God is doing something new – This is a God moment, a moment when heaven and earth are one. Isaiah had longed for this - “Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down”². But God has come not with fire but like a dove, has come into the mud and muck of human existence in this man called Jesus.

And the voice declares the identity of this one who comes up out of the water - "This is my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

In Jesus' culture, a son were recognized as the agent, the representative of his father. Because he shared his father's name, a good son could act in that name and with that authority. The family business was his business. So to say that Jesus is God's son, is to say that Jesus has authority to act in God's name, that Jesus' activity is Jesus going about the family business. God is affirming that Jesus is doing what God requires, is acting as God acts, is doing God's business.

And so Jesus' ministry begins. When Peter is recalling these events for Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, he says that at his baptism by John, Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power – anointed: the same root as Messiah-Christ. And after that, as a consequence of that, he went about doing good, healing all who were oppressed, preaching peace. I once heard someone comment that Jesus went about doing good, while many of us just end up going about.

Think about the stories you know of the way Jesus went about - the way he reached out to the sick and the dying, the way he brought release and wholeness to people who were bound up in evil, the way he sat down and ate with people who were considered inferior, unacceptable and just plain bad, the way he talked with women and children, the way he refused to fight against the violence that was brought against him, the way that he committed his way to God in all his living and in his dying.

“He did not cry or lift up his voice or make it heard in the streets.

A bruised reed he did not break and a dimly burning wick he did not quench.

He faithfully brought forth justice”³

Jesus knew Isaiah's prophecy well. In Luke's gospel, Jesus' first words come from Isaiah ch.60 – “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free.”⁴

Isaiah 42 also announces the mission of the servant of God, the one in whom God delights. The servant exercises tender care for the vulnerable, the disappointed, the damaged, carefully encouraging the smallest flicker of hope, tending tiny shoots struggling to take root. But three times Isaiah reminds us that the servant's mission is to establish justice – the right ordering of relationships among people, and between people and God, relationships that are life-giving and trusting and equitable.

Justice in the Bible is not so much about the law and courts and legal procedures (the justice system as we know it) but about the just and equitable access to resources and acceptance of responsibilities. Justice occurs when people have equal access to the goods and services in society; when people know that their primary responsibility and goal is the welfare, the shalom, of all and each of their neighbours; when all know that when any member suffers, all suffer with them. Justice in the Bible most often shows itself in care for the poor, the widow, the orphan – those who are the most vulnerable and most overlooked in the community. There is work for the servant to do here – eyes to be opened, prisoners to be set free, light to shine into darkness and dungeons. The servant is called to this work, for all the nations, in all the earth, and the servant is equipped for this work because God's spirit is upon him.

Jesus came to John at the Jordan to be baptised.

We too have been baptised. (And if you haven't, you might like to talk to Tokerau or to me sometime about that)

In baptism we have been named.

In baptism we have been claimed by God – you are my son, my daughter, my beloved, in you I am well pleased.

2 Isaiah 64:1

3 Isaiah 42:2,3

4 Luke 4:18-19

In baptism we have been anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power.

In baptism we have been commissioned to do all that God requires –to go about doing good, to proclaim peace, to bring forth justice.

Christmas is over – and now once more, the work of Christmas begins, in our lives and through our lives.

What might that look like for you and for me this year?

What good might we be called to go about doing?

How might we be part of establishing justice in our community, in our city, in our nation, in our world?

How might we support bruised reeds and attend to dimly burning wicks?

How might we provide a light?

Let's take a couple of minutes in silence to wait on God and to listen again to God's voice to each of us

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This is my son, my daughter, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.