

THE DAY GOD WAS BAPTISED

Nic Denny-Dimitriou - 9th January 2005

Matthew 3: 13-17; John 1: 29-34

**THE JORDANIAN RIVERBANK CHRONICLES
FIRST DAY IN THE WEEK
SECOND WEEK IN THE MONTH JANUARY
IN THE YEAR 30
“HAIL TO CAESAR!”**

[Read out newspaper heading incl. “Hail...” – then look around and say “Sorry about the Caesar bit – just got to say it in case there’s a Roman soldier lurking about.”]

There was an amazing scene in the Jordan River this morning, at the place where the strange baptising preacher called John has been for some weeks. As we last reported to you, he’s been predicting that a great prophet from God would soon appear.

Well today, amongst the usual crowd, a man suddenly appeared whom John seemed to highly revere, and who was said to be God’s special prophet. In fact, some said it actually was God.

Yes, God came along to be baptised today!

...Unfortunately the rest of that old newspaper was used to line the rubbish bins so I can’t read the rest of it to you today – but it would have made very interesting reading!

This sermon is entitled “The Day God was baptised – and the day I was baptised.”

We’ll look at the gospel accounts of Jesus’ baptism, together with John the Baptist’s declaration of Jesus as the Son of God. I also want to tie it up with our baptism.

Why had John been baptising in the River Jordan? Long before, the Angel Gabriel announced to Zechariah the upcoming birth of his son John, sent by God with a special purpose. Now as an adult, John had a preaching ministry as preparation for the arrival of the Messiah. He was also baptising people.

This is not to be confused with what we do in Christian baptism – there are similarities, but this was obviously not Christian baptism as Jesus had not yet appeared on the scene! There is a Jewish baptism – a washing with water as a sign of awareness of wrongdoing or imperfection, and a ritual cleansing from that sin. It was an indication of repentance of sin.

In that sense it was just like Christian baptism – and just as water washes dirt away, it was an outward symbol of washing sin away. John was using baptism in this sense, and also as preparation to the arrival of the Messiah.

John had also been sent as a witness to Jesus as the light of the world. He made it clear that he was not the Messiah, but instead pointed people in expectancy to the coming Jesus. The fact that John needed to issue the disclaimer that he was NOT the Messiah is an indicator of general expectancy at the time.

Then one day, Jesus came along to be baptised.

Strange! Surely God didn't need to repent, or to prepare for his own coming!

What on earth was God doing by being baptised?

There are several reasons for Jesus' baptism:

1. In Matthew's Gospel read today, it is recorded that John was quite naturally reluctant to baptise Jesus. Jesus nevertheless insisted John do so, as he put it, "to fulfil all righteousness".

To explain that: in this case, it was a sign of being consecrated to God and approved by God. "Consecrate" means to set something apart for a holy use, or to dedicate something to God for godly purposes.

Approval from God was also indicated by the later descent of the spirit on Jesus. Further, all God's righteous requirements for a Saviour were fully met in the person Jesus.

2. It was the occasion in which Jesus' public ministry was announced. John stated that this was the one he'd been preparing people for, the one he had been sent to give prior witness to... and at that point, Jesus' public ministry in the region began.
3. In his baptism, Jesus (who, we believe, was without sin or failure), completely identified himself with human sin and failure and imperfections. He did not need cleansing or forgiving, but identified with us – a theme repeated often in the New Testament writings, also indicating that he understands us in our temptations and sinfulness.
4. It was an example to his followers of all ages who would be instructed to be baptised in Jesus' name – and we'll highlight more of what that means in a minute, as that was a quite different addition to the original Jewish baptism.

Essentially, the baptism of Christ teaches us something about Jesus, just as his birth does: God became humbled to identify with us and save us from human sin – the essence of our recent celebration of the Festival of Christ’s Birth.

In time Jesus would identify with our sin, and as a sacrificial lamb in Jewish Passover tradition, would be the one taking the penalty for our sinfulness and rebellion against God. In this way, Jesus ensured we would no longer be separated from God due to our sin.

At the baptism, the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus in a specifically observable form, which John seemed also to have expected as confirmation of who Jesus was. In his Gospel account, Matthew adds that there was an audible voice from Heaven saying, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

We’re told that the HS came and rested on him, or came down and remained with him. In the gospel account written by John (not the same as John the baptiser!), he goes on to describe Jesus as “the one who will baptise with the HS”. The gospel writers have made the point that Jesus came to bring us into intimate contact with the divine Spirit. Even then, baptism indicated grace from God in abundant supply. So by baptism with the Spirit, John meant that the Spirit would lead people into the infinite spiritual resources of God.

Drawing this together and relating it also to our own baptisms:

From the beginning of the gospel accounts of Jesus the Saviour, we see his saving and life-giving qualities being pointed out, and these are still of utmost significance to us, and are also what our baptisms are all about - however long ago they may have been.

We see that HE is the one who can take away our sin: As John put it in his Gospel, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” Not just individual acts of sinning, but the sin of the whole world and the general sinfulness of each one of us. In his baptism, he identified with us in our sin, and on the cross he took not only our sin but also God’s condemnation of us, wiping it away as if it never existed – provided we accepted this from God.

And in our baptism – Christian baptism – we are baptised into Christ, that is, we are made a part of Christ and identify ourselves with his death and his resurrection. Christian baptism also brings us formally into the immediate family of God, doing so first by bringing us the grace of Christ’s new life and forgiveness of sins. It is what enables us to call God “Father”. If you listen to the words in our communion prayers, you’ll hear thanksgiving for all of that clearly expressed.

To conclude:

We need ongoing experience of forgiveness of sin and the grace of God, which the HS of God will pour into our lives, which at times still suffer from sin and from the sense of

God seeming distant; on earth we will not fully experience freedom from that, but we can experience it now in part, and continue to grow in it.

We certainly can give thanks to God for what God has done in our own baptisms, when we were spiritually joined to Christ and the immediate family of God. We also know that our own baptism needs to be lived out in our daily lives or it is in danger of losing its meaning. But the Spirit of God has been given to us that we may know more of the closeness of God to us, to know more of the friendship of God, and to know more of the infinite resources of Heaven being made available in our lives.

Amen.