

II. JESUS – BAPTISED, CONSECRATED, AND SENT

Key Scripture passages:

Luke 3:1-22

Luke 4:14-30

Thoughts on the Theme

When I was Vicar of Ellerslie, we baptised a boy aged five who had not long started at school. It was a happy occasion. The next week at church, his mother told us this story. On Monday at school, it was his turn to tell something about himself to the class. He had decided to talk about his baptism (very cool!) When he came home that afternoon, he was a bit subdued. His mother asked him how the talk had gone, and he burst into tears. When he had told the class about being baptised, someone had asked him if that meant he would grow up to be a Christian. His mother asked him why he was so upset about that. He replied through his tears, "When I grow up, I want to be a helicopter pilot!"

I have often wondered what that young man has grown up to be, as he would be in his early 20s now. I hope that, whatever he has decided to do with his life, he has grown up to be a Christian.

Over the last few decades, we have come to understand more and more that a key moment in our Christian life is the moment of our baptism. This sacrament is the sign of our incorporation into the life of Christ. Through it we know that we are joined with Christ in his dying and in his rising again, that we are filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit, and that we share in the eternal life of God.

These things are the gift of God's grace to us, but they are also things that we need to grow up into. In Ephesians 4, Paul is making a plea for the church's unity and explains that the various gifts of the Spirit are for the building up of the Body of Christ to enable each one to come to maturity of faith. He concludes the section in this way. "But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love." (Ephesians 4:15-16)

I have long pondered the idea that this was present in Jesus' life as well. Jesus comes to be baptised by John, at which the voice from heaven is heard declaring Jesus to be God's Son, the beloved, in whom God is well pleased. So identity is established. These are titles which could imply messianic identity. Here is a calling, a destiny, into which Jesus must now grow, and which he must fulfil.

He is then driven out into the wilderness to fast and pray for 40 days. So comes the time of testing of that vocation. Jesus spends these days in solitude, in prayer, and wrestles with the temptations to choose a different path. The temptations are about finding another way to prove his power and identity. God's way will be one of service and suffering. The glory of God will be revealed through humiliation, death and resurrection. In these temptations, Jesus is offered opportunities to misuse power and establish a kingdom based on subjugation rather than self-giving. Thus he returns from

the wilderness in the power of God's Spirit, strengthened for the vocation that God has laid before him.

The disciplines of Lent which we take up at this time are not ends in themselves. They are not to give up something for 6 weeks and thus gain a sense of personal virtue. The disciplines of Lent are a tool in the work of deepening our life in Christ, and growing in our understanding of God's call on our life. And this is not a task for these 40 days alone, but for the whole of our life. The 40 days give us a particular time to focus this growth, and to seek to carry things with us in an ongoing way as we grow and change, and are formed more deeply and maturely in our life in Christ.

And remember, although that this is true for each of us in our walk with Christ, it is a call on the Body of Christ as a whole. Let's not try to do it alone, but give and receive within the Body so that we may up in Christ together.

Scripture Study Notes

Luke 3:1-22

Luke's gospel is part of a two volume work of Luke and Acts, giving an account of the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus, and then of the outworking of that by the Spirit in the life of the early church. The audience for whom the gospel is written would seem to be a Greek-speaking one, perhaps a mixture of Gentiles and Jews. Although under the guise of an orderly and historical account, a perspective is offered so as to encourage faith through the contemplation of what these things mean.

The ministry of John the Baptist receives focus in each of the gospels as preparing the ground for the ministry of Jesus which is to follow. Thus John is at pains to set aside any idea that he may be the Messiah, while also raising expectation that the time of the Messiah is near. John's ministry has many of the marks of the prophets of the Old Testament, with a call to repentance and a warning of judgement. In Luke's account there is much practical advice given as to what that should look like in different lives.

Ritual cleansing had a long history in Judaism, and baptism was sometimes used in this respect. In the first century it was also being used as a ritual for Gentiles who wished to convert to Judaism. John's audience may well have been both Jew and Gentile. To have participated in John's baptism would have been a humbling thing for a Jew.

The question of why Jesus needed to be baptised has puzzled theologians down the centuries. One response to the question is that Jesus' submission to the baptism 'consecrated' the sacrament for us – that is, gives validity to the primary sacrament of (not just John's but) our ministry. There is no sense in which John sees Jesus as needing to repent, but a number of things happen. John is able to very clearly point to Jesus as the One. Jesus identifies with humanity to whom he comes to offer salvation. And most dramatically, God's declaration of the identity of Jesus is made.

This also becomes a moment of commissioning for Jesus in the public ministry which he is about to begin. The 40 days' retreat and its related temptations follow. This serves to clarify the nature of the call on Jesus, and to prepare him for what will follow, which will be an ongoing confrontation with evil, a kind of clash of kingdoms.

Luke 4:14-30

Mark and Matthew simply record that Jesus then begins to make this proclamation of the coming kingdom of God. Luke likewise notes that Jesus begins to teach in Galilee, but only he has the detail of this synagogue moment in Nazareth.

Synagogues were a more informal place and manner of local worship, as distinct from the Temple. They arose from the time of the Exile when there was no Temple. Their services consisted of prayers, the reading of Scripture, comments, and the giving of alms for the poor. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, Jews had to adapt once again to a religion not based on sacrifice in the Temple. Tradition looks to Rabbi Johanan ben Zakai of Yavne who led a conversion in thinking based on Hosea 6.6 "I desired mercy and not sacrifice." Jesus attended synagogue services regularly, and actively participated as adult male Jews were entitled to. It is no surprise that he is invited to read and speak on a visit to his own town.

The use of the passage from Isaiah 61, and the declaration that it is now fulfilled, is a clear claim to Messiahship. Note that the initial reaction is mixed, but ultimately a mob mentality takes hold and drives Jesus out. The beginning of Jesus' ministry foreshadows its end in passion and death.

Questions for Discussion

- It is said that when Martin Luther was having a 'bad day' he would say to himself 'Baptizatus sum' (I am baptised). What does it really mean to you that you are baptised?
- Immediately after his baptism Jesus faced a period of testing in the wilderness, in which there were temptations specific to the ministry for which he had been set apart. What are the particular temptations for Christians who are called to ordained leadership in the Church or lay leadership in politics, education, business, etc?
- *'Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet's hometown'* (Luke 4:24) There is an ambivalent response towards Jesus in the Nazareth synagogue. Identify the range of emotions in the story. How do you explain the Tall Poppy Syndrome in our society? Is it an inherent fear of set-apartness? Where might that come from?