

Sermon 12th January 2014

Acts 10:34-43 Mt 3:13-17 'Turning Points'

Prayer: Holy God, just as you cracked open the skies and descended upon Jesus at his baptism, creak through our defenses, break through with your light to illuminate our choices as we seek the wisdom of your word and your way. We pray in the name of the one baptized for us, Amen

Last week we had the manger – with 'babe' and the Wise Men from the East visiting... within 7 days our story has moved through about 30 years of that 'babe's' life! Today we have the adult Jesus at what might be called THE turning point of his whole life. "To paraphrase Churchill this is not the very beginning (that happened in Bethlehem) nor is it the beginning of his ministry (that happens straight after this with the temptations in the Desert) but his baptism marks the end of the quiet life and the beginning of the long road to Calvary and Easter morning." *Rev Ian Elston, Minister of Kirkcaldy: Torbain

As Peter's speech in Acts outlines, "37 You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached-- 38 **how God anointed Jesus** of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him."

Baptism – his baptism marks a significant turning point in Jesus life. He turned to the living out of his public ministry, which was really only fully understood, in its ending! So today we are called upon to reflect on this turning point of his life. It has been a conundrum for scholars from the very beginning – in fact it was one at the very beginning because John, the Baptiser tried to deter him "saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to *me*?"

Jesus answered that it was the right thing to do, to fulfil all that *God had in mind*. And John turned from opposition to full acceptance. As Jesus submitted to being baptised – just as we are called to do. And when he did, the sky broke open and the Holy Spirit *like a dove* landed on him. The Heavenly voice anointed Jesus with the words: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." What power there is in this moment – for Jesus, for John, their crowd and us. cV

In Jesus' baptism heaven and earth touched, this bolt of raw power was seen, felt and remembered. Baptism is all about the breaking in to our lives the power of God because Jesus did what was right. He was prepared to submit all that he was, to John, not that he had to – like us, but that it was simply the right way to go about things **for us**.

Traditional Church teaching is that baptism is offered as a ritual of repentance where we wash away our 'sin', our unworthiness so that we might come before God, cleansed –and of course none of this *was* Jesus problem! After all, "repent" was what John the baptizer used to call people to baptism.

"Repent", has 'baggage' for us that includes a common Christian misconception of repentance; but if we can recall that it comes from the Greek word *metanoia* we can choose to lose some of that baggage! ***Rather*** than it meaning "feeling sorry for doing bad things," or regretting past actions, or being told of a need for confession..., Metanoia is better understood as meaning "**to change one's mind** or to have a change of heart".

It has even been translated as: to "go beyond the mind" or "go into the larger mind." Scholar Cynthia Bourgeault writes that this "'high teaching' was Jesus' central message: the Kingdom of Heaven means reaching beyond black-and-white dualities, into the larger heart and mind of God." *SeasonsMCom

So rather than the 'old' baggage of the pulpit thumping demands of *sinner – repent* and change your ways because you are evil.....' **Recovering** the more authentic translation, dare we change our mind and hear the call **to open our minds**, going beyond our own and allow the larger mind of God to fill us? Simply because it **is**, the right thing to do?

How hard is it? We have to be open to change! John the Baptist was! He had to let go of his *old* way of seeing the world (Jesus should baptize *me*) and allow for a change of his beliefs to: “I must baptize *Jesus*”. John accepted the invitation into the “larger mind” of God, & saw that Jesus **was** ‘right’.

For Jesus this baptism wasn’t about confession of being ‘bad’ / repenting from evil or even being made clean ... it was to embodying for himself and the world, the seemingly upside-down way he would liberate humanity from the prison of sin and small thinking. And this was right – why he came! In Matthew’s Gospel ‘righteousness’, doing the right thing, means* doing what God wants no matter how it will make us look. *Loader goes on to say: “Jesus’ righteousness is not primarily about being right but about doing what God wants and that is never unconnected from God’s saving, compassionate purpose.” What God has in mind for us.

In Matthew, Jesus baptism is framed by the rest of his life story and its ending. Just as Peter presents it in the Acts; Jesus’ baptism came first – then he went and **did good, healing and releasing** evil from people because God was with him. Baptism for us is the mark of membership in the Church – from the earliest Christian records. It is our being put right with God, our own anointing and assurance of the Holy Spirit within. The mind of God fills us, not completing our knowledge of God and His ways but all too often accentuating our hunger to understand more of the mind and heart of God.

Baptism is not the end of our Christian life story, only a beginning because like Jesus we reached a turning point and chose to walk with Him, chose to walk in His ways –because they are right. Some of us were baptised as babies, or children, some of us as adults – all of us have faced a point of choosing to turn to Jesus and walk like him in the right ways of God.

Today is called ‘turning points’ and I have struggled a little with it, but in one sense it is so true. Yes, baptism is a turning point and an opening our life to the larger mind of God. But after ‘it’ we have daily points of turning in faith for the right way to follow. Sometimes the old ways are strong, I really wanted to share this nugget of information as proof of the strength of the ‘old’ ways: Apparently in the early days of Christianity’s establishment in Ireland, when the priest was immersing a babe at baptism the right arm would not be ‘baptised’, it would be left out so that it would remain ‘pagan’ for good fighting! What is right – is not always so clear which is why we continually need the mind of God to fill us with His wisdom, knowledge and understanding of what we are doing, should or could be doing.

I would offer a moment from the life of the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther to take away and reflect on. When we face a turning point in life and the temptations not to do what is right – we can ‘remember our baptism’. That’s what Martin Luther did: There is a picture painted (Lucking (The Lictionary Commentary: The Gospels)) of the “anxious” Reformation leader, “as he struggled through the lonely months of his safekeeping in the Wartburg Castle. ‘I am baptized,’ he would scribble on his desktop, and remember his baptism as he battled back despair”.

Remembering our baptism in this manner is not suggesting we go on a sentimental journey or make an effort to recapture lost enthusiasm (perhaps ours or that of our parents), in “remembering our baptism” we are seeking to establish an equilibrium on a storm-tossed sea, getting our bearings, remembering who (and whose) we are, and grounding ourselves in that assurance.

Baptism is that point in time when we were turned to God’s way, because it was **THE** right thing and opened us to the larger mind of God where love and compassion and good things belong. Healing, salvation, liberation and complete acceptance happen to and for us, no matter who we are, because God has no favourites!

In baptism we are claimed, we are beloved, and our heavenly father is well pleased. Our life is turned just as Jesus was, to going around doing good, healing and forgiving all, especially those who are under the power of evil, **because God is with us**. We have been charged to do this and more so that the Good News of Jesus is shared and more people experience a point of turning the right way. Amen