

Trinity Baptist Church
Sunday 4th October 2020 – Andy Banks
Mark 1:9-13
Jesus' Identity: The Witness Of His Baptism

Children, feel free to complete the activities we sent out to you, while I talk. And please share you create on the Godzone Facebook page.

We're returning to our series in Mark's Gospel, asking ourselves the question that Jesus asked his disciples in Mark 8:29, "Who do *you* say I am?" Today's passage concludes what many regard as the introduction to Mark's Gospel. So, let's read from Mark 1:9-13.

[Read Mark 1:9-13]

9At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan. 10Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

11And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

12At once the Spirit sent him out into the wilderness, 13and he was in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by Satan. He was with the wild animals, and angels attended him.

[Pray]

1) The problem of Jesus' baptism

We've talked so far of how Mark sets the scene for Jesus through his own statements, through the testimony of Old Testament Prophecies and through the ministry of John the Baptist who came to prepare the way for him. But as soon as Jesus actually walks onto the scene, we encounter a problem, and it is this: why was Jesus baptised?

We know why everyone else was baptised – Mark tells us it was a sign of their repentance and their desire to return to living God's way. But the New Testament is universal in its declaration that Jesus was completely sinless – though he was sorely tempted, he *never* sinned, not even once, throughout his lifetime. And that truth is absolutely vital for our salvation. For if he had sinned, even just *once*, he would have needed a sacrifice on *his* behalf so as to be made right with his Father God again, and then he, himself, could not have been the sacrifice who made *us* right with God. But he could be that sacrifice, *because* he was completely sinless.

So why did Jesus undergo a baptism of *repentance* at the hands of John? *Matthew's* Gospel demonstrates that John himself had misgivings about baptising Jesus, stating that he needed Jesus to baptise *him*, not the other way round. But Jesus answered John, as recorded in Matt 3:15, "it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." That is the only direct answer that the Bible gives us as to why Jesus was baptised, which is not particularly clear! Yet, if we delve into it, we can see clues that are worth exploring further.

a) An endorsement of John's baptism

Firstly, Jesus was clearly endorsing John's baptism. This was a proper and righteous thing for people to do. Repentance and a determination to live life by God's rules *is God's way*. Not only that but, without genuine repentance – turning away – from sin, it is *impossible* to fulfil all righteousness. Jesus endorsed John's baptism.

b) A decision to change paths

Secondly, Jesus' baptism was perhaps a way for him to mark a clear decision for himself. He had no need to repent from *sin*, but the time had now come for him to turn away from his former way of life as a *carpenter* in

Nazareth, and towards his true calling – the path of restoring humanity to righteousness that would see him begin a preaching and healing ministry, and would eventually necessitate his death and resurrection.

c) An identification with sinful humanity

And thirdly, in being baptised, Jesus was identifying himself with sinful humanity. This was the first public act by which he declared that he is not ashamed to call *sinful* humans his brothers and sisters (Heb 2:11). It has been suggested that this was the moment when he began to own our sin as though it was his own. He would not fully bear that sin until his death on the cross, but in being baptised he was, perhaps, effectively declaring, “I am a man, and as such, man’s sin is now my sin. I share in that collective responsibility.” Like Daniel confessing before God the sin of his people as though *he* had partaken in it (Dan 9:5): “We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws” – even though Daniel hadn’t.

Jesus’ baptism was another way of him emptying himself of his glory to fully accept human frailty. And, of course, it was immediately followed by Jesus, in all his human frailty, fighting and winning on behalf of humanity a battle against Satan’s intense temptations. So, Jesus used this moment to mark his choice to follow the path God had laid out for him and he identified with us in our *sinful* humanity, and, yet, like John, he called us to repentance and changed lives.

2) God’s witness at Jesus’ baptism

Then what transpires as Jesus comes up out of the water, is yet more demonstration of his true identity. Mark’s unique description of heaven being “torn open” is both hard to picture, and hugely evocative. Here was a peeling back of the veil that usually prevents humans on earth from seeing clearly the realities of heaven. For a brief moment, those realities were laid bare for all to see and hear! What an amazing privilege it must have been to witness that moment!

a) The Holy Spirit’s witness

And then even more amazing the Holy Spirit of God himself descends from heaven upon this man, Jesus, and alights on him. Mark’s only commentary on the significance of this event is the clear parallel with John’s words about the far more powerful one to come (Mark 1:8), “he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.” So, the Spirit alighting on Jesus is clear evidence that he is the Coming One about whom John was speaking. The fourth Gospel brings that out more clearly, stating that John the Baptist recognised who Jesus was by this sign, because God had told him that the Spirit would descend in the visible form of a dove upon his chosen Messiah. And so, he concludes, “I have seen and I testify that this is God’s Chosen One” (John 1:34).

Why a dove? We don’t know. Some have suggested it could be symbolic of the gentleness that would characterise Jesus’ life and mission – though one wonders how gentle he was when he called the Pharisees “white washed tombs.” It might be an echo of the story of Noah, when God made his first covenant with humanity – this being the start of the New Covenant in Jesus. It might even point back to the Spirit hovering over the waters during creation, and so suggest a new creation to come through Jesus. But whatever it may symbolise, its *primary* purpose was to clearly demonstrate the Spirit’s anointing upon Jesus, by God’s gift.

Not that that anointing was not new! I’m sure the Spirit’s anointing was on him from *birth*, to enable him to live a sinless life up to that point. But there is something very significant about this visible demonstration of God’s anointing on him as he is about to embark on his life of ministry. God was singling out this man, demonstrating his choice of him, so that people would listen to him. And no doubt Jesus, himself, benefitted from that visible demonstration of God’s presence with him immediately prior to the ordeal of temptation he was about to face in

the wilderness (though notice, it is the Spirit, not Satan who sets up that encounter) – God remained always in control!

b) The Father's witness

And then God the Father himself spoke, affirming and confirming Jesus' true identity. Yet, as Mark records it, addressing this so personally and lovingly to Jesus himself: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Interestingly, the form used for "whom I love" may also convey the sense of "my only." "You are my Son, my *only* Son I love; with you I am well pleased." God makes similar pronouncements to us – "You are my beloved son, my beloved daughter" is a very true statement of us too. But it is not true of us in quite the same way that it was true of Jesus. We *become* truly God's sons and daughters when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour. Jesus is *eternally* and *uniquely* the Son of God.

And why was God so pleased with him? Could it be because of his willingness to do God's will and so win back for him his people who had so gone astray? But just think for a moment, and remember that Jesus was truly and fully human. What must it have felt like for *him*, at this moment of decision to begin his ministry, to hear this affirmation from God, "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased"?

Now imagine yourself among the crowd. Before John there's been no new word from God for the best part of 450 years, yet all your life you've heard stories of how your people will be set free and restored to greatness when the Messiah comes. And John's been speaking of the One coming who is far greater than him, who will even baptise in the Holy Spirit of God. And now you've witnessed God speaking directly to this man Jesus, and declaring to him, "You are my Son!" What do you think in that moment? What do you feel in that moment? What difference might this declaration make to your life?

Now return in your mind to the present day, and ask yourself the same question, "If Jesus is truly and uniquely God's Son, God himself in human flesh, what difference does that make to my life?" Are there sins of which you are refusing to repent? Can you afford to do that? Or, conversely, do you know for certain that, if you are in Christ, you too have been made a son or daughter of God? Do you believe that he truly loves you? Do you believe that he could be delighted with you – for nothing more or less than the fact that you have chosen to put your trust in his Son? Have you experienced the freedom of knowing that because he has taken your sins as though his own, you no longer need to bear them? What difference does it make to your life that Jesus has been declared to be God's beloved Son?

3) The Trinity at Jesus' baptism

One last thing before I finish. Lift your eyes afresh and look closely at what is going on here in this holiest of moments when the heavens are torn open and we get a glimpse of the reality that lies behind the seen universe. What do we see here? We see God the Father, talking with God the Son, on whom comes to rest God the Holy Spirit. God is unequivocally One God – that was drilled into the Jews again and again through their Scriptures. And yet here Jews witnessed first-hand Three distinct Persons, all God, all working together for one goal, yet each with their own unique roles to perform. It was events like this one that radically transformed Jesus' disciples' understanding of God's Oneness, and led them eventually to articulate a doctrine of a Trinitarian God – Three-in-One. And it is in gazing at events like Jesus' baptism that we understand that doctrine best – not in trying to define an abstract concept that is way beyond our understanding, but by observing the concrete reality of how the Trinity interacts with each other and with humanity in history. Drink in that truth, and meditate upon it as you go through today. Enjoy this wonder. Enjoy who God is – a Three-in-One community of love! Amen?

[Pray]