



Sermon preached by Dr Simone Maghenzani on 9th January 2022

Readings: Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22; Isaiah 43: 1-7; I Corinthians 8: 6

Here we are, at the beginning of a new year, looking at the episode that starts the public ministry of Jesus: his baptism by John. A crucial story among those of this season of epiphany, or of the revelation of God in Jesus' ministry on earth.

John was clearly a figure of some notoriety in first-century Palestine. That of 'oracular prophets' – i.e. those who announced oracles of woe upon Israel if it did not repent – is a well documented phenomenon at the time. Unlike others, John gathered followers, and we know that some remained faithful to him even after his death. His activity was both 'religious' and 'political' (if that distinction is even possible for this period). Despite coming from a priestly family, John's words were challenges to the customs of his generation, and accusations of corruption and moral bankruptcy to the ruling elites. His baptism – something also common in Judaism – was a strong opposition to the authority of the Temple. As always in history, eschatology is not simply just about things to come, but a vehement critique of the present. John announced an imminent judgment on the nation, warning Israel that its status as God's covenant people would not be enough without repentance and conversion.

Now, it would not escape some that a sermon containing strong accusations against self serving ruling elites, perhaps against feeble leaders more prone to enjoy parties than to think about the common good, would probably write itself even today. And indeed, the Church is called to speak truth to power.

But this would be too simple: John was preaching about changing one's ways, but his ultimate goal was not simply to obtain a reform in behaviour and morality. John wants to deflect the attention from himself: the focus is the Christ, who is coming, and who will shift the conversation to an entirely different level. Further, if this story is just about ethics, what would be the point for Jesus himself, the perfect Son of God, to be baptised? Why did Jesus need to be baptised?

Of course, an historian's answer would be that Christianity emerges among radical religious movements of late second Temple Judaism, and that the early Church reimagined a connection with John's movement in thinking about its own genealogy. But there is more. And that more is a word: obedience. Jesus first public act of ministry is an act of obedience: obedience to his call. Jesus – the only one who is perfect and who did not need redemption – voluntarily immerses himself into the waters of repentance and redemption because in him – and only in him – the entirety of humanity repents and is redeemed. In this very human act of baptism, our own possibility of repentance and redemption is opened. God has made himself truly human: God's Son is incarnate among a suffering humanity, truly in need of redemption and hope. And in Jesus's baptism the symbol shifts its meaning, prefiguring his death on the cross and his resurrection.

This is why it is at this moment of Jesus' life that a revelation of the Trinity takes place. The Holy Spirit descends as a dove upon Jesus, and the voice of the Father in heaven declares him to be his Son. You see, many in the early centuries of Christian history – often called heretics by the Church – have used this story to say that Jesus was adopted by God, or that Jesus was subordinate to the Father, and that the idea of the Trinity was just an invention. Indeed, the language of the Trinitarian dogmas is very far away from our own everyday life: but the revelation of the Trinitarian God is all here, in the Gospel. God reveals himself as the Trinity not with an essay on his own nature, but in showing approval towards the mission of Jesus for us. God reveals himself in the moment in which Jesus brings his own and our humanity together in the waters of the Jordan river, in an act symbolic of death and resurrection. God does not enter into a discussion about himself; but in this revelation,

one of the most excellent of the entire Bible, God presents himself as called to our redemption. The cross is not an accident that happened to some Palestinian troublemaker who asks us to be better and behave better: God chooses to die as us mortals do and for us mortals, so that in him we can live the life of the resurrection. Brothers and sisters: we only know God as he reveals himself. And God reveals himself as God for us in Christ. Thirty years or so after his birth in a manger, on the banks of the river Jordan, Jesus is still the Emmanuel.

Let's stop a moment. I can fully hear the objection to the tenor of my sermon. What to do with all this? We live in the midst of a pandemic, shops half empty, distancing, Omicron...this is just pure theory and speculation. We need something practical for this week, not a lecture...

I would like to suggest that this story teaches us three things for today.

First. God does not reveal himself in his own exaltation, but in lowering himself. In undertaking this most humble act – being baptised with sinners – Jesus says that he is not where we might expect to find him. God, salvation, and hope are to be found where nobody might be looking. It is in humility that the Trinity is revealed. The Trinitarian God is about what goes on here on earth, not the high heavens. The glory of God is revealed in humanity at its weakest, in misery, among poverty, where there is desperation. Not because those are inherently closer to God. But because God chooses to build a kingdom whose rules are opposite to our instinctive ones. No matter how low you feel, God has chosen to come down there, to be beside you. No matter where you are, God will walk with you.

Second. The only way to know God is via Jesus Christ. Many of us will not struggle if asked to recite the ancient Creed: 'I believe in God, the Father Almighty...'. Actually, may I say, the early church would have done a better job by starting with the Son, instead of with God the Father. Indeed, it is the Father that sends the Son, but it is only the Son that reveals the Father. Jesus is the only door given to us to know God. We can only say of God what we can say of Christ. Which does not mean that God will exclude from his grace those who do not know Christ. Karl Barth puts it much better than I ever will: 'In his oneness Jesus Christ is the Mediator, the Reconciler between God and humanity. Thus He comes forward to humankind on behalf of God calling for and awakening faith, love and hope, and to God on behalf of humankind, representing it, making satisfaction and interceding. Thus He attests and guarantees of God's free grace and at the same time attests and guarantees to God the humanity's free gratitude'.

Third. Jesus's baptism reminds us of our own baptism. Baptism, like so many dimensions of Christian life, is a simple act with many different meanings. It is a symbolic act that we associate with the moment of initiation into the Christian faith, regardless of whether it takes place in the life of an infant or in the life of an adult. It is a visible reminder of the cleansing, renewing, restoring, life-giving power of God's grace at work in our lives. It is a wonderful opportunity to reflect upon the fact that God's grace is extended to us long before we ever completely understand it. It is a sign of being drawn into the life of Christ, and embracing both his descent into death and his re-emergence or resurrection into life. It is an act which symbolizes our participation in the covenant, just as the Jewish people used the symbol of circumcision to reflect the covenant that God had established with their people throughout the generations.

As the Apostle Paul put it in II Corinthians, the promises of God to humanity are a 'yes' to and in Jesus Christ. 'It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.' In the death and resurrection of Jesus symbolised by baptism we find our death and resurrection, and we are in him united. Who will separate us from this union? Who will take away this love from us? God will not forget his promise of love, hope, and of a future of peace. And, friends, I submit, this is the strongest and most practical thing the Church can say in this time of suffering and sorrow.

Amen.