

The Baptism of Jesus

9 January 2011

Matthew 3:13-17

“Pivotal moments in life, like the baptism of Jesus,
require us to surrender to God, our loving parent”

Introduction

We can all recall pivotal moments in our lives, when something crucial happened; moments that marked a turning point or a new chapter, points at which we chose to follow God’s plan for our lives, to surrender ourselves to God’s will. One of those for me was on Christmas Day in 1986. I had just finished matric, and decided during a conversation with one of my Mother’s cousins to not pursue a career in music, but rather in the helping professions. I remember telling my family about it in the car on the way home, and they all said, “Oh, okay” like they had long seen that decision coming. Afterwards, I recall feeling that I was surrendering myself to my destiny – that sounds rather grandiose, but really what I mean is that I recognised that my calling was into the helping professions not into music, and that pivotal moment was about surrendering myself to that calling – to God’s call.

For Jesus, a key pivotal moment was his baptism by John the Baptist. This event marked a transition from Jesus’ life as a regular person – as the son of Joseph and Mary, as an apprentice carpenter – to Jesus’ life as the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One. Here too, Jesus surrendered himself to his destiny, to God’s call on his life. God’s plan for Jesus was not to be a carpenter, but to be the Messiah, come to liberate all of humanity from the clutches of sin and death. Jesus’ transition from one kind of life to this new life required him to surrender himself to God’s call.

We all know that following God’s call is not always an easy thing. Quite often we fight it. After all, God’s call sometimes seems to make little sense. I wonder what it is that God is calling you to? What do you need to surrender yourself to? Today, as we look at Jesus’ baptism, we reflect on the example that Jesus is for us, an example of how to surrender to God’s call, even when that call is really hard. Jesus knew, at least at some level, that surrendering himself to God would eventually lead to his death. And yet, he did surrender.

Let us pray...

In the passage before this we learned about John the Baptist, of whom Matthew says: “This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: A voice of one calling in the desert, Prepare the way for the Lord; make straight paths for him.” John challenged the Jewish people of his day to confess their sins and to prepare for the coming of the Messiah. His ministry was unique, and has given Bible scholars a headache, because baptism was not part of Jewish practice, except for those who were converting to Judaism. But let us recognise that this uniqueness was a sign of something new that was coming. John recognised that his destiny was to prepare the way for Jesus, by pointing the people of Israel towards their need for salvation. And John surrendered himself to that destiny, even though it led to his death. And so he says in vv 11-12, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

A Willingness to Change

Then, says Matthew, “Jesus came from Galilee – his hometown – to the Jordan to be baptised by John.” This is, in a sense, a first step in surrender – the willingness to move from one place to another. Sometimes this may require an actual change of residence. We think of Abram in Genesis

12 (1&4): “The Lord had said to Abram: Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. ... So Abram left, as the Lord had told him.” But there are other forms that this movement or this change may take. Pivotal moments open up new possibilities in life – we become better aligned with God’s plans for us, plans that are good. The prophet Jeremiah (29:11-12) said, “This what the Lord says: I know the plans I have for you; plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.” But pursuing God’s call requires movement from us – action, decisions, change. Things cannot stay the same when we surrender. Jesus’ surrendering himself to God’s call required him to leave Galilee in order to find John, to leave behind one life in order to take up another.

So the question for us friends, is what is it that we need to leave behind? What do we need to change in order to surrender ourselves to this call?

Turning away from Worldly Wisdom

John the Baptist is rather shocked by Jesus’ presenting himself for baptism and argues with Jesus – “I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?” John’s baptism was a baptism of repentance – of turning away from sin towards righteousness. Jesus, of course, was without sin, so really he had no need of John’s baptism. John is perceptive and recognises that Jesus has no need of his baptism, but rather it is John who is in need of Jesus’ baptism. And so he argues with Jesus, trying to deter Jesus from being baptised. But Jesus insists, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.” And then John consented.

Now, there is much debate among Bible scholars as to why Jesus felt it was necessary for him to be baptised. But let us not get stuck in that today. Rather, let us recognise a second lesson about surrender here – that sometimes people may encourage us to NOT follow the path of surrender, as John did here to Jesus. Surrendering ourselves to God’s will is often not the most obviously sensible thing to do – Paul talks about it as “fool’s wisdom”. God’s call may take us away from worldly values and ambitions. And so there may be people around us who point this out and call us back to a more pragmatic and human ambition – to wealth, status, advancement and recognition. These are not evil people – no more than John was evil. But they are not assisting us to surrender to God’s will. And so we need, like Jesus, to be loving and firm in our insistence that we need to follow God’s path.

This challenge to Jesus’ surrendering himself to God’s will comes to a climax in the following passage, which is the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. We all know the story well, of how the devil worked hard to deter Jesus, to make Jesus into something other than the Messiah that God wanted. And of how Jesus used scripture to challenge the devil and to hold fast to God’s call. This kind of surrender was not a passive “let go and let God”. Rather, this kind of surrender is an impassioned pursuit of God’s will in the face of massive opposition. And it required of Jesus and requires of us a quiet but strong certainty that God’s ways are better than the world’s ways.

And so the question for us, today, is, who is not helping you surrender yourself to God? Whose views do you need to put aside in order to surrender yourself to God’s call? And how can you assert your decision to surrender in a way that is loving, firm, clear and unequivocal?

Listening for God’s Approval

As soon as Jesus is baptised, as he comes up out of the water, a most wonderful thing happens. And we must try to imagine what this might have looked like had we been there. Heaven opens up, like when a gap in the clouds open and the sunlight pours through its rays. And the Spirit of God descends like a white, shimmering creature, like a dove, and lights on Jesus’ head. And a voice from heaven, the very voice of God, speaks: “This is my son, whom I love; with him I am well

pleased.” What a transcendent moment for Jesus, particularly having just surrendered himself to God’s will. He is anointed with the Holy Spirit and affirmed by God the father. Would that we might all have such an experience.

This is the third lesson about surrender. God is intimately involved in the process of our surrendering. We might think about this affirmation from God as a reward for Jesus’ surrender; but it is much more helpful to think about it as an integral part of the process of surrendering. Jesus, the second person of the Trinity, God the Son, could not have surrendered without the willingness and participation of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. It was a team effort. And the image of Jesus rising out of the water, with the Spirit alighting on his head, and God the Father speaking down from the heavens has been captured again and again in art. Jesus could not, and we cannot, surrender ourselves to the will of God, without the enabling of God. It is all part of the same package.

We had a conversation in Morning Prayer yesterday about whether we can expect to hear God speak these words to us: “This is my child, whom I love; with her, with him I am well pleased.” We may think that these might be words that we will hear one day when we die. But remember that Jesus heard these words *before* he started his ministry. God was already pleased with him, *before* he began to do God’s work. And so can we. Friends, we need to learn to listen to God’s words of love and affirmation. We need to hear them and grasp them in such a way that they grow in our bellies. Let us each accept these words of affirmation for ourselves today – that you are God’s beloved and that God is pleased with you. And let us draw strength and courage from this as we seek to surrender ourselves again to God’s will for our lives.

Conclusion

Jesus had a remarkable calling from God – a call to redeem humankind, and indeed to restore the whole cosmos. You and I, we don’t have such magnificent callings. But each of us is called – we are called to serve Christ in our families, in our places of work, in our community and in this church. We are each called to exercise our gifts, to apply our talents, to utilise our treasure. We are called to build God’s kingdom here – to redeem the world that we encounter in our daily lives.

And in the same way that Jesus had to make a conscious decision to surrender himself to God’s call, we also need to make conscious decisions to surrender ourselves to God. And so I want to leave you with these four questions. Difficult questions – questions that I myself find hard to engage with, but important questions nonetheless:

1. What is God calling you to this year?
2. What do you need to change in order to surrender yourself to this call?
3. Whose views do you need to put aside in order to surrender yourself to God?
4. How can you learn to hear – to really grasp – that you are God’s beloved, God’s delight?