



Baptism of the Lord (Year C)

Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth**

We have just listened to the story of the baptism of Jesus from the Gospel of St Luke. Today's Gospel tells the story very simply, almost we might say in an off-handed manner. Unlike Saint Matthew's Gospel, Saint Luke does not tell us much about the encounter between Jesus and John the Baptist. In Saint Matthew's more detailed version we hear about the surprise of John the Baptist that Jesus comes to him for baptism: *"It is I who need to be baptised by you and yet you come to me!"* he says to Jesus.

We, too, might feel a little surprised and want to say to the Lord, *"Why were you baptised? You had no sin to be forgiven. You had no need of repentance and conversion. You didn't need to be baptised, as those who listened to John the Baptist's message did, and as we do".*

If we do wonder about this, we can be helped by the approach taken by Saint Luke who is concerned to direct our attention not so much to the baptism of Jesus itself but rather to what happens immediately afterwards. Jesus is at prayer, immersed in his relationship with God his Father. The heavens open, the Spirit of God descends, and the voice of God the Father is heard: *"You are my son, the Beloved. My favour rests on you"*. In Saint Luke's understanding these words hold the key to the whole mystery of the baptism of Jesus.

The words are heard by Jesus in the depths of his own heart, confirming and strengthening him in his mission, and they are also heard by those around him. At this moment, when Jesus steps out of obscurity, emerges into the public eye and begins his life of preaching, teaching and healing, he is revealed to be not just an extraordinarily good man, not just another in the long line of Israel's prophets, but a man who is so closely at one with God that God calls him his beloved Son and reveals the presence of the Holy Spirit who is always with him. This is one of three significant moments in the early life of Jesus which the Church has always seen as being especially important. Just as Jesus is proclaimed as the saviour of all people, and not just the Jews, when the wise men, non-Jews, come from far away to worship him in Bethlehem, and just as Jesus is revealed as the bringer of life, joy and abundance into people's lives at the Wedding Feast of Cana, so today Jesus is revealed in all his glory as the only Son of God and the bearer of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of Jesus is the confirmation of what St Luke's Gospel will make clear on every page that follows: that Jesus is not just another, though especially good, man - Jesus is God among us.

A proclamation like this calls for a response. It called for a response from those who were there at Jesus's baptism and from those who would encounter him during his life - and it calls for a response from us as well. Our faith is not meant to be a set of dry academic teachings. It is



meant to be a sincere, enthusiastic, ongoing response to the incredible truth that God, who is the creator and sustainer of everything that exists, has come among us as one of us in Jesus, so that in Jesus we might see the face of God, hear his voice, experience his love and respond to him in faith.

The words which we hear at the baptism of Jesus find an echo in another incident much later in Jesus' ministry. It is the event we know as the Transfiguration. On that occasion, too, those who are with Jesus see him as he really is, transfigured and standing in the presence of Moses and Elijah. In the man Jesus they see the glory and presence of God and just as at the baptism so here, too, they hear the Father's voice. This time, however, something that is only implicit at the baptism becomes very explicit. As well as the Father's voice proclaiming, "*This is my son, my beloved. He enjoys my favour*", the disciples also hear the words which follow immediately: "*Listen to him*".

This, of course, is the response which God is asking of us as well. As Christians it is not enough for us to hold some truths just in an intellectual way. Our faith must engage all of us, not just our minds. It must, we might say, also engage our hearts if it is to be real. And this, perhaps, is the question today's celebration puts before us: in my day-to-day life, with all its challenges and its possibilities, are the eyes of both my mind and my heart fixed on Jesus? If he really is God's Son, as today's gospel proclaims him to be, isn't this precisely where my life should be centred? Am I really listening for his voice each day? And this of course leads to an even more challenging question: what am I doing to respond to this voice, to this call of the Lord in my life?

We do, of course, need to train ourselves to listen - and in our noisy and busy lives this is not always easy. Apart from the obvious fact that when we come to Mass we have the scriptures read and explained for us, one of the reasons why the Church is so insistent on the need to come to Mass each week is because it provides us with such a precious opportunity to step aside from our normal activities and enter into a different space where everything is designed to help us enter into a time of communion with God.

Today then let us allow the gospel to challenge us not in an accusing way but with a precious invitation: in Jesus we encounter the Beloved Son of God and come to know God, and his love for us, in a new and powerful way: why would we not want to listen to him and then respond to him with love and in faith? Today we ask ourselves the question: what will it look like in my daily life if I were to begin to listen more consciously and carefully for the voice of the Lord?