

Baptism of Christ - Reflection

Isaiah 42:1-9

Acts 10:34-43

Matthew 3:13-17

Epiphany, as you may know, means “revelation” or “manifestation” and this is the church season where we remember the revelation of God to the world. If we had the readings for Epiphany itself (which was Tuesday), we would be hearing the story of the magi coming to the infant Jesus. In this season, from Tuesday to Lent, our readings will focus on that revelation of God to the world, the revelation of Emmanuel, and this, as always, starts with the baptism of Jesus.

The baptism of Jesus is one of those events that all biblical scholars but the most sceptical agree is a historical fact. There is a general consensus that Jesus having been baptised by John indicated that Jesus was John's disciple and therefore to then claim that it is Jesus who is the Messiah required a justification of that submission. If it was an event that had not occurred, why would all four of the Gospels otherwise include it? However, if you read the four Gospel accounts together, you will see subtle differences in the story, which reflects the various authors' concerns and theology.

In Matthew, who was writing for a Jewish-Christian community, we hear echoes of the servant songs of Isaiah. The voice from heaven, which appears in Mark and Luke speaking to Jesus (“you are”) now speaks in the third-person to the bystanders (“this is...”). In this gospel, the voice is not to tell Jesus who he is or to call him to ministry, it is for the bystanders to understand this is the Messiah. Indeed, the opening of the Gospel has been focused on the question of “who is Jesus.” Before this point we have heard partial answers – the Son of David, Emmanuel... - now we get the complete answer in this voice from heaven. The identity of Jesus is given explicitly and directly to the people who will listen.

Additionally, for the people of Jesus' day, the voice from heaven was something that happened in the long-distant past, which will happen again in the last days. The fact that God speaks to the people in a voice from heaven indicates to the audience that these are the end days – as Jesus went onto preach “the kingdom of God is at hand.”

If our Gospel reading had started a few verses back, we would have been in the middle of a reading which we heard during Advent. Before Jesus turns up, John is condemning the Pharisees and Sadducees for their self-righteousness. John's response to Jesus, as to the common people, is completely different to his reception of the Jewish leaders.

So, in the story of Jesus' baptism Matthew's struggling Jewish-Christian community hears images of Isaiah's servant, the last days, and condemnation of hypocrisy. Take a moment to think about what this might have meant to Matthew's community, who had just been thrown out of the synagogues.

There is another element that is worth exploring, which is present in our Acts reading. Last time this reading was in the lectionary I observed how the story we heard today repeats itself three times, which is the ancient equivalent of underlining, highlighting, and adding red pen saying “this is really important!!!” The usual focus of such discussion, and it is important, is the inclusion of the gentiles. Indeed, this passage is usually nominated as the

start of the mission to the gentiles, although that is not quite 100% correct. However, there is also another element to this reading.

The usual order of conversion is preaching, conversion, baptism, and then “speaking in tongues” (or other signs of the Spirit). In the story of Cornelius, the order is conversion, preaching, signs of the spirit, then baptism. What this is showing is that baptism is the sign of what God has done, not method through which God acts. Cornelius is already experiencing signs of the Spirit before he even hears Peter. In short, alongside Peter we are reminded there is nothing we can do to limit the action of God in our world.

This became important some four centuries later when the early church was dealing with leaders who had given up their faith under persecution – what did this mean for the people they had baptised? There were those who argued that it meant those people were not really baptised and they had to be redone. However, the dominant party looked to stories like the story of Cornelius and realised that baptism is just the sign of what God is doing; there is nothing that we can do to create that grace ourselves or to take it away (from either ourselves or other people). This is the reason the early church declared rebaptism a heresy.

God's grace, God's spirit is a gift to us regardless of what people do. The only question is how we respond, especially when we see it in unexpected places. Do we close our eyes, or are we like Peter and see it as a new opportunity to learn about God? Do we stagnate in that grace or are we like Cornelius who explored the understanding of “what next?” How do you experience God's grace in your baptism? How do you allow it to change you?