

An Ordinary Baptism?

(Mark 1:1-11; Genesis 1:1-5 – Preached at Footscray Baptist Church, Jan 10th, 2021)

Baptism. We are, Footscray Baptist Church, our name indicates that Baptism is important to us.

Baptisms occur by dunking, full immersion, sprinkling, pouring. They occur in fonts, baptistry's, rivers, beaches, pools. Sometimes they are adults making their own decision, other times they are children where adults make vows on their behalf, other times whole households are baptised together.

For Baptist's it is very significant – many lived and died because of their views on baptism. Having rejected infant baptism and the state religion in England, it meant that they had difficulty attending school and couldn't hold what we now call public service jobs. Similar things were happening in Europe.

Baptisms in the Baptist Church are usually undertaken by teenagers or adults who understand the meaning it and have chosen to make such a public statement about an inward conviction.

Baptism, however means many things. Generally speaking, for Baptist's, the act itself is full of symbolism and meaning. It is

- a) A response to God – it is a Public statement about a new relationship with God, about a new Christian identity and often is a symbol of a conversion experience.
- b) About following Jesus – it is an act of obedience (Matthew 28:19) and a sign of beginning to follow Jesus, both his example and teachings.
- c) A sign of salvation and liberation (Red Sea), cleansing and healing (Namaan), repentance and turning around (John's baptism).
- d) A sign of new birth – dying to the old and rising to new life
- e) A reminder that we now are sons/daughters of God and together members in the body of Christ (church).
- f) A reminder that we are all equal – there is no Jew/Gentile, male/female, free/slave – all are equal before God.

In our reading from Mark today, we find John the Baptist conducting baptisms in the Jordan river. Many are flocking to be baptized, responding to the teaching of John who calls for a change – repentance, not just saying sorry, but undertaking a radical turn around that changes what must be changed, straightens what is crooked, that seeks justice and prepares earnestly for an encounter with the Lord.

John is described as a bit of a wild man and wearing weird clothing (not dissimilar to that of Elijah). However, John the Baptist is not the main focus of this story, he is just the prelude. The story really begins when Jesus wades into the muddy waters of the Jordan, joining as he does dozens of other pilgrims to be baptised by his cousin. An ordinary run of the mill baptism like everyone else is receiving.

Well not really. Some extraordinary things happen - the heavens are torn open, the Spirit of God descends like a dove, and a voice from heaven speaks. Reminiscent of the opening verses in Genesis where we have the wind/Spirit from God sweeping over the waters, light being created and a voice from heaven announcing that it was good. We have the same elements here –we find God acting, we find God’s Spirit present and hear God’s affirmation. In the very beginning of God’s story and now the very beginning of the Jesus story we see God acting and present via his Son and Spirit and the affirmation of God.

This story is the first we have of Jesus in Mark. Right at the start of Mark’s gospel we see the relationship between God and Jesus. In this baptism God gives Jesus a unique position and his Spirit-filled ministry begins in this moment.

So why is it that Jesus submits to baptism by John? Does he need it? Is this for him a baptism of repentance? Is it just the trendy thing to do? Perhaps we are asking the wrong question, perhaps rather than asking why we should ask why not. Perhaps for Jesus it was a non-question, rather baptism was a good and righteous thing to do. Perhaps the why is not as important as what this baptism affirmed and to what it led. In this baptism God affirms Jesus. This baptism marks the beginning of a fascinating and fatal ministry.

This ordinary baptism is actually extraordinary.

This baptism of Jesus is an act of solidarity. It is an act of solidarity with the people, Jesus too undergoes the same ritual as many others. It is an act of solidarity with God – here we discover the deep interconnection between Jesus and God. It is also an act of solidarity with the little people. This is the beginning of a very public ministry that will see Jesus living with, loving and supporting all kinds of people many of whom are outcasts in society.

This moment of baptism marks a big change in Jesus’ life. From this time on Jesus is going to go about his ministry in an entirely new fashion, he is going to take on a very public personae. In the next three years or so, Jesus will find Satan having a go at him and people will quit their jobs to follow him. Demons will scream out at him and news of him would spread throughout Galilee. There will come a time when he won’t be able to enter a town without creating a disturbance, he will be accused of blasphemy and people will plot to kill him.¹ These waters of baptism signify for Jesus an enormous change in his life. There is a very real sense that this baptism is Jesus’ ordination for ministry.

What of us? What of our own baptism which occurred at what ever age and by what ever means? Was it a baptism of repentance, the symbol of a returning again and again to God? Did it mark the transformation of the total direction of our life and of our relationship to God? Did it change both the inner and outward aspects of our life? Does it continue to call you out to undergo the same sort of dramatic transformation that Jesus did? Does it mark for us the beginning of an act of solidarity with God and for mission?

Every baptism is extraordinary.

¹ From “Ordained for Mission” by Nathan Nettleton

Every baptism is the beginning of a journey, a journey of following in the footsteps of Jesus, a journey of seeing heaven opened as people gain understanding, as people are healed and included, as people are embraced and share in life.

As the gathered baptised believers here at Footscray, may we go out and follow in the footsteps of the Son and be a people on mission for God. May we go out and turn the world upside down, at least in our corner of it.

May we all hear the voice of God – you are my beloved and in you I am delighted.