

Mark 1:4-11

4 And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

5 The whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem went out to him. Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan.

6 John wore clothing made of camel's hair, with a leather belt round his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

7 And this was his message: 'After me comes the one more powerful than I, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.

8 I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.'

9 At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan.

10 Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.

11 And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

Acts 19:1-7

1 While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples

2 and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' They answered, 'No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.'

3 So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?' 'John's baptism,' they replied.

4 Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.'

5 On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus.

6 When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.

7 There were about twelve men in all.

Christ's Baptism Mark 1:4-11; Acts 19:1-7

Today's the day in the church year when we think about Jesus's baptism. I was brought up in a baptist churchgoing family - my dad was a lay preacher - and I was baptised at the age of 19.

It wasn't that I felt my life was a mess, I just had a strong conviction that I was missing something which christians had, and I knew it was something to do with Jesus. I also knew that, scarily, baptism had to be a public declaration of my commitment. In the Anglican church we have a different understanding of baptism because most if not all of the time we only see children baptised, who are usually too young to know what's happening to them. Confirmation of course gives a chance to show your commitment when you are older. My own experience of what was full immersion baptism still remains massively significant in my life even now, nearly 47 years on.

When we hear the story of Jesus' baptism we have the same question John did - *I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?* How is it that Jesus needed to be baptised? If I suggested that he needed to repent then I'd be accused of heresy! But this **was** John's message to everyone else, and although we don't like the word repent and see it as very regressive and old fashioned, old style preaching, it is what is necessary. It actually means think again. And when you rethink you realise your need. An honest admission of your need of Him is God's only way in to your heart and mind. That's the reality. That's the route to eternal life. It always will be.

So what was Jesus doing? Matthew's gospel expands on this where Mark doesn't, by telling us Jesus's response: *Let it be so now John; it's proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.* The point, as I have said, is that we must submit to God. And we must repent. Jesus didn't need to repent, but he had to submit to the Father as the very heart of his mission, and just like my own public declaration of faith, Jesus had to be seen doing this. It must have seemed to onlookers that the carpenter's son was now a disciple of John the Baptist. Not quite true, but it was right and proper for him to publicly admit his surrender to the Father. If we want to know how to respond to this call now in the 21st century, the answer is that nothing has changed. Do we admit our need? Do we come to God as repentant sinners or are we happy to control our own lives? Jesus is our role model, and Jesus asked John to baptise him, so that it was known that he humbly acknowledged the Father.

Baptism is a symbolic act, an outward sign that we need to be washed clean spiritually, and full immersion is a powerful act of commitment and a moving experience for the people present. But John's message did not stop at 'repent and be baptised'. His follow up word of prophecy is this: *I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.* What does that mean? We know that as I have said, water baptism is symbolic. But is baptism with the Holy Spirit also just symbolic?

Well no it's not. If we're serious about following Jesus, we can't

possibly be limited to water baptism. The second suggested reading for today is this strange passage from Acts 19: *While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' They answered, 'No, we've not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit.' So Paul asked, 'Then what baptism did you receive?' 'John's baptism,' they replied. Paul said, 'John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus.' On hearing this, they were baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied.*

So these must have been John's disciples, because no mention had been made of the Holy Spirit, and possibly even no mention of Jesus either. What we have to realise is that John's was not a Christian baptism, because Jesus was not risen and Pentecost hadn't happened. When we baptise people into Jesus it's always in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit because these are the three persons of the Trinity. And John specifically said that Jesus would baptise them with the Holy Spirit. And this is not symbolic, this is real, because it's only the Holy Spirit who gives us an understanding of God which we cannot ever achieve by our own effort. He opens our eyes. He reveals himself to us. If you have not received the Holy Spirit you cannot be a christian.

If our faith in God is a result of our own efforts and not enabled and empowered by the Spirit of Jesus himself, then we aren't allowing God in. We want to keep control. The Sarum prayer says the following: (and this is a pretty radical prayer!) *God be in my head, and in my understanding; God be in my eyes, and in my looking; God be in my mouth, and in my speaking; God be in my heart, and in my thinking; God be at my end, and at my departing.* Sometimes our efforts to please God, to practise our beliefs, actually become a barrier to his work in us, and faith just becomes a struggle to achieve. Life will also still be a struggle, especially now, but if Jesus has baptised you, or if you prefer *filled* you, with the Holy Spirit, your faith will be a help to you and not a complication because he is in your heart, your head, your eyes, your thinking. *Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove.* Clearly we can see the Spirit was instrumental at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In fact He could not have completed his mission without the Holy Spirit. So how much more do we need him to fill us with the Holy Spirit, as a daily process. You've probably heard the word sanctification used to describe Jesus's lifelong transformation of each one of us into his likeness. He does this, unlike John's water baptism, by baptising us, filling us, with His Spirit on a daily basis. He just needs us to be open to that possibility. Let's pray for the strength to keep saying yes to Him. Amen.