

The Heart of Baptism

Read: [Matthew 3:13-17](#), [Isaiah 42:1-9](#)

The month of January is often thought to be named after the Roman god **Janus**, who has two faces, one pointing back to the past and one pointing forward to the future. Janus is thus the god of transitions, the god of beginnings and the god of endings. Hence January marks the transition from the old year to the new year, and gives us the opportunity to look back and to look forward.

Today's story about the baptism of Jesus is a key **transition** story. It looks **back** to the Israelites entering the Promised Land and what was expected of them as they crossed the Jordan River. The story also looks **back** to the Prophets like Isaiah who wrote about God's promises of renewal and hope. And for us, we look **back** to the baptism of Jesus that in many ways marked the end of his hidden life as the son of Joseph and Mary and marked the beginning of his public ministry, as he is announced dramatically to the world as the Son of God.

But even in the Isaiah reading there is the promise that God is always doing a **new thing**, in this case planning to rescue God's people from exile in Babylon. So even as we look back, we are also encouraged to **look forward** to what God is up to. God is doing a **new thing** in Jesus the Messiah, making new possibilities in our relationship with God. In one of the companion texts for today from the book of Acts, God is doing a **new thing** by pouring out the Spirit on Gentiles – non-Jewish people – marking their acceptance – and subsequently paving the way for **our** acceptance – into the people of God.

And for us personally, we may look **back** to our baptism – or our confirmation if we remember that occasion – perhaps recalling the hopes and beliefs of our parents or ourselves for our life of faith. But today at the start of a new year we may also **look forward** to what new things God may be calling us to do in in our time and in our community.

What is Jesus' baptism really about? People at time of John the Baptist hoped for freedom from the yoke of Rome. They also hoped for a renewal of the spiritual life of the nation – living in a way pleasing to God. For some groups like the **Essenes**, the group to which John probably belonged, people showed their commitment to this renewed life by being baptised. For other groups like the **Pharisees**, the renewed life was about following God's laws – the torah – to the same extent as the priests in the temple.

So there were different versions of what God desired ... just as there are many versions today of what might constitute the good and godly life, a life pleasing to God. The community of people that Matthew is writing for faced some similar questions and had some similar issues to us today:

What is God doing?

How do we best follow Jesus in our individual and communal life?

Why does so much seem to be going wrong in the world if Jesus came to renew the world?

These are good questions that have no simple answers.

But it seems to me that the passage about the baptism of Jesus – and certainly the Isaiah passage with which it is linked – have three threads that begin to answer these questions. These threads are **identity**, **empowering** and **purpose**. Let's quickly look at each of these in turn.

First is **identity**. The person or group addressed in the Isaiah passage is called **God's servant**, the same title given to both Abraham and Moses. This implies that they are not only known by God but have a close relationship with God, who not only accepts them but even **delights** in them. This same thought carries over to the Matthew passage where the voice from heaven – assumed to be God's voice – names Jesus as 'my Son, the Beloved' – and repeats the thought from Isaiah that God is well pleased with Jesus.

One of the most striking features of Jesus' relationship with God is that he consistently calls God '**Father**', implying a relationship based on intimacy and love that a parent has for a child. So we are encouraged not to regard God as some distant, holy, unknowable figure but someone whom we too, like Jesus, can call our Father. Baptism is the sign that we have been accepted into God's family and have the privilege of calling God **our** Father, implying that we are **children** of God. So the words spoken over Jesus can also apply to us ... we too are God's beloved children whom God takes great delight in. If you hear nothing else today, please let this truth seep into your heart and spirit.

The second thread from these passages is that God **empowers** both the servant people and Jesus so that each can fulfill what God calls them to do. According to Isaiah, God's people in exile – whom God is calling my servant – were feeling weak, vulnerable and forgotten. God speaks reassuringly to them ... 'I uphold you ... I take you by the hand ... I sustain you' ... and even more ... 'I place my Spirit on you'. Here is God taking the initiative and providing all that the people need to follow God's ways. It's the same for Jesus. At the very beginning of his public ministry, the Spirit of God descends upon Jesus like a dove. This Spirit will guide, encourage and empower Jesus throughout his ministry.

In baptism, we are named and included in God's family. And we too are given the gift of the Spirit to strengthen and guide us in our Christian walk. The commitments of baptism to be a loving, nurturing, supporting and encouraging one another are only possible **with God's help**, as the baptism liturgy highlights. Only with God's Spirit living within us to guide and empower us will our words and our actions be filled with God's love.

... which leads us onto the third thread in these passages ... namely our purpose as God's people. For the people in Isaiah's day, their purpose is focused on justice. The people are called to faithfully bring forth justice to the nations and to persevere until God's justice is established in the earth. This is the righteousness that God desires – that people live rightly – with God and their neighbour. These words – justice and righteousness – occur frequently in

the OT as descriptions of God's character. So, through the prophet, God is calling the people to reflect God's own character in how they live. This is the light for which the nations wait.

For Jesus, these ideas about justice, light and righteousness are summed up in his favourite teaching topic, the **kingdom of God**. In the summary of Jesus' teaching given in the **Sermon on the Mount** living in the kingdom involves showing mercy to others, acting in a way that brings good to others, controlling our anger, forgiving and even loving our enemies, acting with integrity – so our words and actions line up, trusting God to provide what we need and always treating people as we would wish to be treated. All of this is possible only if our heart attitude reflects God's character of justice and righteousness.

According to the baptism liturgy, our individual calling is to proclaim by word and example the good news of God in Christ, to seek Christ in all people, to love our neighbour as ourself, to strive for peace and justice and to respect the dignity of every person. So in baptism there is both God's commitment to us – to name and affirm and empower us – but also our commitment to God and to following the teaching and ways of Jesus. Baptism encourages us to think of ourselves as **disciples** or followers of Jesus, who strive to practice all that he taught.

For me, this means always having a welcoming and hospitable attitude towards others, to accept them for who they are – whether they be folk who come to the community lunches here each week or the families who come to playgroup or the asylum seekers at the Detention Centre. It means being generous with my time and talents – which also involves sharing the good news of Jesus with others. Just as I have been blessed by God, so I want to bless others and to see them as God sees them, and to treat each one with God's love and grace.

Although we are only baptised once, it is always good to remember our baptism – to remember what God has done in us and for us through Christ –

giving us a new identity, a new relationship with God and other believers, and a new purpose. In the words of the reaffirmation of baptism liturgy we are called to “always remember you are baptised and be thankful”.

Along these lines, I invite you to stand as we reaffirm our faith with these words that come from the Iona community:

With the whole church:

*We affirm that we are made in God's image,
are befriended by Christ,
and empowered by the Spirit.*

With Christians everywhere:

*We affirm God's goodness planted at the heart of humanity
and our worthiness to be called God's children
that we celebrate in baptism.*

With the whole of creation:

*We celebrate the miracle and wonder of life,
God's purposes at work in the world,
and our role to seek justice, peace and reconciliation.*
