

LOOKING AT LIFE THROUGH THE LENS OF THE GOSPEL

Luke 3:15 As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, ¹⁶ John answered all of them by saying, “I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

Luke 3:21 Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, ²² and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

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THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

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Initial observations

The baptism of Jesus by John is found in Mark, Matthew, Luke, the Acts and John. There are, however, differences in the reception and in the interpretation of the tradition. First of all the reception: Mark mentions the baptism without apparent difficulty, although he locates John as Elijah, the one coming before the coming one; Matthew is very uncomfortable and inserts a dialogue in which John the Baptist objects to his baptising Jesus; Luke copes (!) by telling us before the baptism that John was in prison (see the verses above in italics, omitted in the lectionary reading); John gives only the phenomena around the baptism and actually leaves it out when you read the text carefully.

All of this means that the baptism of Jesus by John is indisputably historical because Christians would not have made up a story which caused them so much unease and even embarrassment. Secondly, it means that the baptism was highly significant, both historically and theologically. Historically, the baptism marked the moment when Jesus accepted the role and preaching of the Baptist and at the same time began his own awareness of being the Son in a quite special way.

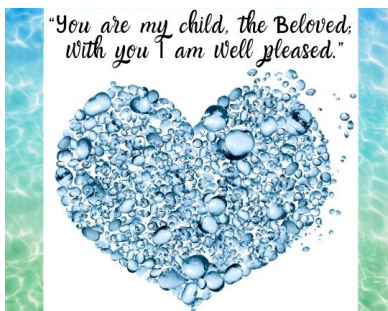
Theologically, each gospel interpreted the event in the light of the faith concerns at the time of writing. The details for Luke are in the comment below.

The link with the Baptist has more importance than is commonly recognised. It looks as if John the Baptist was a prophet, who had departed to the desert and the Jordan, a move which implied some rejection of the Temple cult. He preached conversion of heart (metanoia), illustrated in a once-off immersion rite. His demanding ethics were offered in the light of the coming dreadful intervention / judgement of God. What precisely John looked forward to is somewhat unclear: an angel, another prophet, God himself, the messiah? It is historically likely that John proclaimed that the coming one would baptise with wind (pneuma) and fire (both images of judgement; cf. Psalm 1). The text was “Christianised” by qualifying wind/spirit with “holy”, yielding Holy Spirit.

Thought for the day

The great scenes in the Bible, precisely because of their greatness and indeed uniqueness, can be difficult to access personally. For the Baptism of Jesus, there are at least two potential approaches. Firstly, we could go back in our minds to a life-changing turning point in our own lives, so that we can speak of before and after. Secondly, we could also turn to our own experience when we felt deeply the affirmation of our identity and worth as “the beloved” of someone. In the case of Jesus, these are combined: his identity and life are one, something we would like to be able say about ourselves too.

KIERAN O'MAHONY OSA—www.tarsus.ie



“The descent into the waters of our spirit, is a journey into the presence of divinity. Through the immersion in waters of life there comes the realisation that to be a child of the earth is to be a child of God All human beings are children of God but not all live with an awareness that there is ‘that of God’ within them.” (W.L. Wallace

A meditation for this week: Repeat the last sentence of this gospel, becoming aware of God speaking these words to you personally: *‘You, are my beloved daughter/son, with you I am well pleased.’*

TRÍONA DOHERTY & JANE MELLETT—Go Deeper

The baptism of Jesus is an important event in each of the gospels, heralding as it does the beginning of Jesus' public life and marking him out as the beloved of God. Luke's account of the baptism does not focus on the event itself but on its aftermath, i.e., the descent of the Holy Spirit on Jesus while he was at prayer. In describing it in this way the evangelist is highlighting two themes that are central to his gospel. These are the role of the Holy Spirit and the importance of prayer in the life of Jesus. For Luke, the fact that they are important in the life of Jesus means that they must also be important in the lives of his followers.

SEACH GOAN—Let the Reader Understand, Year C

POINTERS FOR PRAYER

1. The people were searching and John pointed them in the direction of Jesus. On your life's journey who have been the John the Baptist people for you, people who have pointed you in the right direction?
2. The Baptism of Jesus was a very special moment for him that affirmed him in his identity as Son of God and in his mission. Recall the experiences that affirmed you – either in your sense of who you are, or in relation to the direction you were taking in life.
3. The Baptism of Jesus marks a transition point in his life, and the start of his public ministry. Recall the transition points in your own life. Where did you see the grace of God at work in those times?
4. This experience of Jesus occurred when he was at prayer. What part has prayer played in opening you to being aware of God in your life? What part has prayer played in helping you through a transition point in your life?

JOHN BYRNE OSA—Intercom

General Comments

The Baptism of the Lord is first of all an extraordinary religious experience. St Luke's is the only version which says that Jesus "was at prayer". Luke does not emphasize the actual baptism at all, but presents it as the prelude to the main event – the descent of the Holy Spirit and the voice from heaven.

We should enter fully into the images:

- "The Holy Spirit descended in bodily shape, like a dove" – the experience of the Holy Spirit is vivid but very gentle.
- "A voice came from heaven" should be interpreted in the same spirit as the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is so vivid and so gentle that it could only have come from heaven.

The voice makes three statements, each with its own importance:

- "You are my son" – in the Bible, divine sonship is attributed to kings, usually on the occasion of their enthronement; royal power is conferred on Jesus.
- "The beloved" – Jesus is assured that he is loved tenderly, as a bridegroom is loved by his bride.
- "My favour rests on you" says that God's love remains permanently with him – it is not something temporary. We are reminded of Jesus' words at the Last Supper, "As the Father has loved me so I have loved you, remain in my love" (John 5:9).

The inclusion of verses 15 and 16 in the liturgical reading reminds us that Jesus' baptism took place when John the Baptist's ministry was about to come to an end. The baptism was therefore Jesus' call to public ministry. This fits the biblical pattern by which a call to do God's work is always preceded by a deep experience of God, e.g. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Gideon in the Old Testament, Mary and Zechariah in the New.

Experience bears out that this pattern of a deep personal experience leading to a new commitment occurs in the lives of many people. It happened to saints such as Augustine, Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila and Margaret Mary, and to many other great men and women. We can identify a similar pattern in our own lives too.

MICHEL DE VERTEUIL—Lectio Divina on the Sunday Gospels, Year C

Spirituality is an unfortunate word. For many it can only mean something useless, devoid from real life. Yet the "spirit" of a person is something valued in modern society, because it indicates what is deepest and finest in people's lives: the passion animating them, what inspires them and what ultimately they manifest to the world.

The texts left to us by the first Christians show them living their faith in Jesus Christ as a strong spiritual movement. Animated by the Spirit they experience life in a totally new way.

Their experience of God has changed. They no longer lived with the spirit of slaves, but with the spirit of children. The Spirit of Jesus makes them cry from their hearts 'Abba, Father'. This experience is what defines everyone in communities that belong to Jesus.

The way they live their religion also changes. They no longer feel like prisoners of laws, rules and precepts but are freed by love. They listen to the call of love. This is the climate we should all cultivate and promote in Christian communities if we wish to live like Jesus.

These communities also discover the true meaning of the worship of God. What pleases the Father is not rituals devoid of love, but a life 'in spirit and in truth'. A life lived with the spirit of Jesus and the truth of his gospel is, for Christians, authentic 'spiritual worship'. To develop a Christian spirituality is to revive our religion.

JOSÉ A PAGOLA—Following in the Footsteps of Jesus, Year C