

## **MATTHEW 3:13-17**

### **ST JOHN'S, 12.1.20, 9.30 am**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Well, I hope you've enjoyed your ride in the TARDIS this week. Last Sunday we were in Bethlehem, about two years after Jesus was born. Today, we've arrived amongst the crowds of people beside the river Jordan, just as Jesus is coming to be baptised.

Jesus is about 30 years old. We assume that he's lived a very ordinary life for a Jewish boy growing into manhood. We also assume that Joseph has died at some point: the last time he's mentioned is in Luke's gospel, when Jesus was 12, and Joseph was with the family at the Passover in Jerusalem. So we also assume that Jesus has become the head of his family. We can also assume that Jesus and his cousin John the Baptist spent quite a lot of time together as they grew up, and that they're both aware of the stories of their own miraculous births. They each know what the angel Gabriel told John's father and Jesus' mother about the Lord's purposes for their lives, and that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, come to save God's people.

John's been preaching for a while: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*. He's been prophesying: *he who is coming after me. . . will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire* (v 11). John's started a national revival movement. Hundreds of Jews are coming out to John in the desert, and asking to be baptised. They're confessing both their own sins and the sins of their nation, and asking the Lord to cleanse them and make them fit for his kingdom. One commentator says that

'not since the days of Ezra [over 400 years previously], and perhaps not even then, had there been such a national turning towards God.'<sup>1</sup>

And so, for Jesus, the moment he's been waiting for has arrived, the moment to leave behind his carpenter's bench and his family, the moment to begin his public ministry. As a first step, Jesus has joined the crowds flocking out to be baptised by John. Jesus wants to identify himself with John's message, and with the revival movement.

But there's a problem here! John's calling people to repent of their sins. The problem is that as God's Son, Jesus doesn't have any sins to confess! John, knowing who Jesus is, recognises the problem, and tries to get Jesus to change his mind: *I need to be baptized by you, and and do you come to me?* (v 14); in other words: 'I need your Spirit-and-fire baptism, not you my water-baptism'. Jesus replies, *Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness* (v 15). I want to focus on that for a few minutes, and think about what it meant for Jesus and John to do all that God requires, and then about what it might mean for us today.

#### **FULFILLING ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS**

John's message was that people should be baptised as a sign that they turned away from their sins and acknowledged God's total claim on their lives. That's what repentance means: it's about doing everything God's way, instead of 'my way'; its about accepting God's will and God's lordship over our lives.

Jesus didn't need to repent, because his life was already totally consecrated to his heavenly Father, completely submitted to his Father's will. By being baptised, Jesus was publicly acknowledging that God had that total claim on his life, just as he had on the lives of the people around him.

As so often in Scripture, I think there's both a challenge and an encouragement here for us. The challenge is this: to what extent have I allowed God to exercise his total claim on my life? Am I prepared to admit that I might have got some things wrong when I find my ideas clashing with the teaching of Scripture? Am I prepared to admit that I am totally dependent on God for everything? Am I prepared to obey the Lord in all things, even when obedience might result in humiliation, in going against my own inclinations, or in being misunderstood by my family and friends? All too often we find ourselves baulking at the teaching of Scripture, or at the things the Lord asks us to do. The issues are different for each of us, but here are a few examples which might touch a few nerves!

The Bible teaches us that everything we have comes from God. We're called to acknowledge that, and thank him for the many blessings he gives us. We're called to use all that we have and all that we are to his glory. In material terms, we're to give generously, both to God and to other people: we owe God at least 10% (a tithe), and we're encouraged to give even more. Our lives are to be totally at his disposal. That includes decisions such as whether or not to get married, whom we should marry, where we should live, what work we should do. Our

bodies are temples of God's Holy Spirit, and as such should be treated with great honour, and not abused, for example by the use of drugs, or by unhealthy lifestyles. If we honour our bodies, we won't engage in sexual relations except with our marriage partner; if we have no marriage partner, that means we'll be celibate. We're called to love one another, and even to love those whom we consider to be our enemies, which means putting ourselves out for each other, carrying one another's burdens, considering others more important than ourselves. We're called to care for those who are less fortunate than ourselves, which means more than throwing money at mission societies and charities, but actually getting our own hands dirty, and spending time with the down-and-outs. Are you feeling uncomfortable yet? I know I am! *Fulfilling all righteousness* is not something to undertake lightly.

The encouragement in all this is that Jesus has been there before us! He knows what it's like, and he never asks us to do anything that he isn't prepared to do himself. He's our pattern in all this: his life was totally at his heavenly Father's disposal, to the extent that he never had much in the way of material possessions to give away. All that he did, all the relationships he made, were submitted to his Father in prayer. In an age it was almost unheard of not to be married, Jesus didn't marry and was celibate. There's no greater example available to us of how to love people – and Jesus shows that loving people doesn't always mean being nice to them! And in addition to all this, Jesus humbled himself when he allowed John to baptise him; he humbled himself even further when he allowed himself to be nailed to the cross

and become a curse. And he did it for our sakes – for your sake and for mine – and for the sake of every single person on this planet, no matter how evil we might consider their lives to be. We can never step lower for other people than Jesus did for us, when he did all that God required of him.

### "MY BELOVED SON, WITH WHOM I AM WELL PLEASED"

I want to spend the next few minutes thinking about the voice from heaven which speaks following Jesus' baptism. I hope that my reason for focussing on it will become clear!

Matthew, Mark *and* Luke all mention the voice speaking from heaven, both here at Jesus' Baptism, and at the Transfiguration. But unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew quotes exactly the same words on both occasions: *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*. So let's think about the significance of that for a few minutes.

Anyone who knows the OT scriptures well is reminded by these words of Psalm 2:7: *I will tell of the decree: the LORD said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you"*. These words were addressed to the Old Testament king, descended from David. They were also understood to be about the coming Messiah. The second part of the utterance from heaven points to Isaiah 42:1, which is the beginning of the first of Isaiah's famous 'servant songs': *"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations"*. In other words, right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, his Father speaks to direct his

thoughts to a triple identity - as the Son of God, as the Messiah or 'Anointed One', and as the Suffering Servant who will suffer abuse and opposition and eventually die for the sins of his people. If you think about Jesus' life and ministry from this point onwards, you can see how he lived out his triple identity as Son of God, Messiah, and Suffering Servant. Matthew re-emphasises the point when he reports the voice from heaven using these exact words again at the Transfiguration.

It's mind-blowing when we realise that this man, Jesus, was the dear Son of God, and yet he was prepared to leave the glories of heaven, where he enjoyed the praises of the angels, to come and live as an ordinary human being on this earth. As we sang just before Christmas:

*Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,  
All for love's sake becamest poor;  
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,  
Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.  
  
Thou who art God beyond all praising,  
All for love's sake becamest man;  
Stooping so low . . . <sup>2</sup>*

### CONCLUSION

We are weak, fallible, human beings who consistently fail to *fulfil all righteousness*. No matter how hard we try to fulfil our Lord's requirements, we fail, time and again, because we are flawed.

But sometimes Christ's church seems to be full of people who don't even want to do all that God requires. We think we're too wise to admit

that *the foolishness of God is wiser than men* (1 Corinthians 1:25). We think that we know better than God how to live our lives. We can't bring ourselves to identify with the down-and-outs, the so-called dregs of our society. We spend our time and energy fighting each other, and so fail to fight injustice and to love our neighbours. We don't submit decisions about how we spend our money, how we use our time, how we treat our bodies, to the Lord. We swallow the lie that all religions lead to God, and so fail to obey Christ's command to *go and make disciples of all nations* (Matthew 28:19).

Think for a moment about Jesus' humility. Think what it must have cost Jesus to relinquish his status as the Eternal Word, and come and live on earth, in complete submission to his Father's will. I wonder whether, if Christians took more time to meditate on all this, we'd be more humbled, more willing to follow in Jesus' steps, and do all that God requires.

I want to end by quoting a passage from Paul's letter to the Philippians:

*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being*

*found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father* (Philippians 2:5-11).

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Green, The Message of Matthew: the Kingdom of Heaven, (Leicester, IVP, 2000), p 80

<sup>2</sup> Frank Houghton, Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour, copyright © Overseas Missionary Fellowship