

## **Baptism of Christ (10.1.21 – Mk.1:4-11)**

Just how sceptical should you be about whether the Gospels are really, historically, true?

Take, for instance, the story of the visit of the three wise men to the stable – leaving, on one side for the moment, that the Bible doesn't even claim there were three of them, and that wasn't a stable in sight. Maybe, like most Christians, you think that, points of detail aside, that that story definitely happened pretty much as written. Or perhaps you suspect it is rather too good to be true. It fits so perfectly with St. Matthew's overall theological picture – of Jesus the true King worshipped by the Gentiles, and of his Kingship fused with ideas of divinity and death. It's *exactly* the sort of story that someone committed to all that, and steeped in the Hebrew scriptures, might dream up about the early days of Jesus' life. To such a person it would tell the truth beautifully – the *real* truth about who Jesus was, if not necessarily the boring truth about what had actually happened. Truth is a much bigger thing than mere facts.

People often- quite rightly – worry about reading the Bible that way because they think: gosh, where would it stop? How do we know *any* of it is fact? What else in the Gospels might not have happened? Walking on water? Healing a blind man? The resurrection? Could all of these be just picture stories, ways of speaking about some mysterious bigger truth, and not actually history in the bog standard 'yes this really happened, if you'd been there with a camera you'd have seen it' sense?

Well, my sermons usually last for about thirteen minutes. Guess what: that question of quite how historical the Gospels are is too big to deal with in that time. Please do grab me, or in these plague times, call me, email me and I'll very happily talk for much longer about it. But for now, just one observation. Even the most sceptical of historians think that certain bits of the Gospels are almost certainly just *true*. True in the boring, straightforward, factually true way. And of those bits is the story of the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. I think I'm correct in saying that *all* serious historians would agree that *that* really happened.

Why? Well, various reasons, but the key one is that no early Christian writer would ever have made this up. And indeed, in their different ways, all the Four Gospels seem a bit sheepish about reporting it. John barely mentions it. Mark and Luke skim over it. Matthew invents a little dialogue about why it happened, even though it shouldn't have. He has John the Baptist protest: I need to be baptised by you – and do you come to me? That's the big problem for the early Christians. I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me? It's not just that Jesus being baptised by John makes John look more important, the one who does the giving and Jesus the receiving. That's bad enough, but even more so was this: John's baptism was for sinners. It was meant to be about confessing how badly you as an individual, and Israel as a people, had gone wrong. It represented going under God's judgement, drowning the old life so you could start again. Baptism was for the bad. And one thing early Christians were agreed on was that Jesus Christ was not bad. Not bad at all.

Now, this idea is something lots of us really struggle with: that in Jesus, there was no badness at all. No sin. People doubt that for a couple of reasons. On the one hand, they operate with frankly quite a trivial idea of sin. They think the claim is that Jesus was never irritable, never swore when he stubbed his toe, or never as a child was bit too rough in playing games. He is the most goody goody-two shoes of all time, just perfect in every way. It's hard to decide whether the picture is more unattractively priggish, or simply unbelievable.

And sometimes this is combined with another thought: that being really human involves the experience of moral failure. The best human beings, we think, *aren't* perfect – they're the ones who have failed, who know they've failed, and know what it is to admit they're wrong, cope with the consequences, and who work hard at making good what they've broken and being reconciled to the ones they've hurt. We sense the wisdom in what Leonard Cohen said: there's a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in. A human being who isn't cracked doesn't only seem impossible. It's not even *desirable*. How could such a person grow? How could they know what it is to receive grace and mercy?

Put it like that, and it sounds very credible. Cohen's right: we do need our cracks. That's an accurate description of what being human is like. However, it does need put within a bigger picture. True, in our experience of being human, you don't get wisdom, you don't get grace, without going through sin and failure and repentance. But what makes you think that *our experience* of being human is all there is? Or indeed, that it is actually the real, true experience of being human? Christianity says: your experience of being human is actually the experience of damaged goods. You – all of us - are defective. Ever since the apple came off the tree – and of course, we know that is symbol, that is metaphor - nobody has known – not one of us – what it is to be really human, really the image of God. We're cut off from our roots, cast out of the garden, adrift, exiled. To judge what being human really is simply by our current experience is like judging being a wolf by observing my dog; or the quality of schools in England today by Google Classroom. We know not of what we speak.

*Real* humanity, says the Gospel, is what you see in Jesus of Nazareth. He is human as human was meant to be. Look at him, and you see someone who in every way was what God intended – in whom there was nothing to stop all the joy and beauty and ferocity and energy of God flowing. In whom there was no distortion, no corruption. Did he swear when he stubbed his toe, did he on occasion play the first century equivalent of football slightly rougher and harder than strictly necessary? Did he ever have to apologise to someone, and mean it, for being a bit out of order? I think maybe he did. He wasn't a goody-two shoes, he wasn't necessarily perfect in that squeaky-clean, precious kind of way. But did any of these things get in the way of him loving the Lord his God with all his heart, all his soul, all his strength and all his mind, and doing that always and everywhere and from the depths of his being? *That's* what Christians have always denied. In him, we have said from the beginning, there is no darkness at all. In him, there is only God. In him, the light needs no cracks, for there is nothing to get in its way.

Which is why it is astonishing, wrong, nonsensical for him to come to John, and let that sinner push him down under the Jordan water. He has no place there, down in the murk, in the mud, with the broken things. That's where we belong, with all our mixed-upness and confusion and guilt and need to start again. It's our place, not His. The life full of light does not fit there, down in the darkness. John sensed this, he tried to stop him, but he insisted, and down he went. Why?

And of course, this is the heart of the Gospel. He goes into the dark place, the place of murk and failure, to make it a new place. To fill it with life and light. John baptised with water; Jesus came to baptised with the Holy Spirit – to fill the murky darkness with fire that would transform everything, that would take broken, damaged, lost human lives and breathe into them again the original breath of God. He came to be where sinners are, down in the depths, down in the cold, in the dark, so he could share with them, so he could give Himself to them. He put himself there so that from now on, all of us could be found with him and in him, all of us – no matter how damaged and lost we are – could be made anew in him. Made, eventually, like him. He took our place, so we could share his: my beloved child, in whom I am well pleased.

The baptism begins what was finished on the Cross. He came to rescue us – not just teach us, not just advise, not to give us a few new ideas and show us a better way. But to reach down into the murk – to *go* down into the murk – to find us, and make again what we were meant to be. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.