

Baptised into Jesus Christ

Luke 3:15-18, 21-22

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Sermon at St. Luke's Chapel, 11 January 2015

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The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, 'I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.' And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'

The Old Testament promises of the Messiah were on the minds of many. As people lived in difficult times, many waited for a liberator who would free the Jewish people from Roman domination and deliver them into an independent nation. Many awaited a liberator who would bring happiness, peace and prosperity.

Today's Gospel text tells about John the Baptist who had come to the attention of many people's minds, and many questioned whether John the Baptist might be the promised liberator, the Messiah. John, however, only prepared the coming of the Messiah. John himself was not the Messiah. John the Baptist himself denied that He was the Messiah.

John was the last of the prophets of the old covenant. Unlike other prophets, he saw with his own eyes what the other prophets hundreds of years earlier had predicted. That is why Jesus later acknowledged: "I tell you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John." (Luke 7:28a).

John proclaimed God's will, God's law to the people. And the people repented of their sins. But before the law of God, John had to confess that he is also only a sinful man.

John the Baptist could not to be accepted by God on the basis of his own righteousness. John still had to have faith in the future atonement, since John died before Jesus' atoning death. That is why Jesus said about him (Luke 7:28b) "The one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than John the Baptist" John himself probably realised that most of all.

John the Baptist, however, knew his task. He baptised the people with water for repentance. The Messiah whom he proclaimed to be coming, would also baptise the people. But the baptism of the Messiah would be quite different: the Messiah baptises with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

The Holy Spirit is the love of the Gospel and the gifts that God's love wants to bring to every human being. Jesus Christ, our Lord, wanted to atone for our sins on the cross thanks to his great love.

The Messiah baptised also with fire. Fire represents God's and our Lord's truth, righteousness, and judgment. John the Baptist said in our Gospel text: "[He will] gather the wheat (believers) into his barn, but he will burn up the chaff (unbelievers) with unquenchable fire.'

God had John the Baptist given word that the person on whom he would see the Holy Spirit descending, was to be the Messiah as predicted by the prophets. The Gospel text tells that now Jesus comes to John to be baptised, among other people that were gathered around John. But Jesus' baptism was quite different from all the other people who had come to be baptised by John: As Jesus was praying, heaven was opened, and then the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove. And up from the sky God's voice was heard on earth: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." By saying so the Holy God confirmed to everyone that Jesus is indeed the Messiah and His Son.

John baptised people to repentance, so that people would live in repentance, and cease from sinning. However, living a repentant life is a continuous struggle and stress. It is to live under the law. Even though God's will would be fulfilled to some extent, this kind of life is heavy and joyless. God's law does not give the power to be and to do good, but it takes strength. By living only under the law of God we will grow tired and wear out and - eventually - die. The Bible says that "the wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23).

But we Christians have not received John's baptism of repentance! [We are not anymore living under the law, but under the mercy of God, BF]. We Christians are baptised in the atonement of Jesus. We are His own, and we have been atoned so that we may live our lives for our Lord, free from our load of sins. Such a life is a continuous "righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). Such a life our Lord wants us to lead! And this is the good news that we bring to other people in word and in deed.

After his baptism, Jesus began His public mission on earth. He taught the people, healed the sick and did good. Our Lord proclaimed a new kind of life, the kingdom of God, which is righteousness, joy and peace.

A new life springs from such joy and love. In such good news resides the power to change a person completely, as the Apostle Paul says (Romans 1:16): "The gospel is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes."

Let's pray:

We thank you Lord Jesus that you came to us in such a visible and touching way. Thank you, that you were born a brother to us, a man, even if you are God. Thank you, that just because of this you can atone for our sins. You can atone for our iniquities that we have committed against our Creator. Thank you that we have received the baptism of this atonement, and that we can live a new life of the Christian freedom, joy and peace. Thank you that you baptised us in this way with the Holy Spirit. Fill us more and more with your Holy Spirit, so that every day we joyfully cast the old man in us into the depths of the sea. And make us rise every day with You to a new life in which righteousness, joy and peace prevail, and thus create such new life in our midst [and around us, BF]! This we pray in Your Holy name.

Amen!