

Loved by God

Bible reading: Matthew 3: 13-17

As we work through the early chapters of Matthew's Gospel, we hear about significant events in Jesus' life. The birth stories. The escape to Egypt, away from Herod's brutality and massacre of infants. The return from Egypt to the town of Nazareth, which became Jesus' home. The proclamation of John the Baptist and his ministry of preparation for the way of the Lord.

Then we come to Matthew's account of Jesus' baptism. It's covered in 5 verses – yet it is rich in meaning and application. What is it that God wants us to hear today, for our own lives, and for our work as a church, from this story?

It was a very purposeful decision by Jesus to be baptised. 'He came **from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John.**' (*Matt. 3: 13*) It was a moment of special significance for Jesus where God acknowledges his love for Jesus and his delight or pleasure in him. Then Jesus is anointed by the Spirit for the commencement of his public ministry.

We can relate to this incident in Jesus' life in a number of ways. It may remind us of our own baptism. It may speak to us of the symbolism of water – a most precious resource in this dry continent. How essential water is for life. We may long to hear those words which Jesus heard that day: 'You are the beloved and on you my favour rests.'

I think that's the first detail that God wants us to absorb into our life today. You are loved by God. Several years ago, the Christian Television Association ran an ad that featured the theme, 'Loved by God'. Among other images, it showed a baby being born, and then a row of Buddhist monks in their orange-saffron robes, with the words on the screen, 'Loved by God'. We know that God loves babies and children. Does God love Buddhist monks? By portraying the theme in a different way, it made people think about the extent of God's love, about its all-inclusive nature. The sad fact was that at the time, the people responsible for producing the ad received letters from Christians who were very upset and angry about the ad. The thought of being angry about the love of God seems inconsistent.

Many people, maybe ourselves included, hear voices telling them that they are no good, that they are a problem, that they are a burden, that they are a failure. They hear a voice that keeps saying, 'If you want to be loved, you had better prove that you are worth loving. You must show it.' Sometimes we translate that for ourselves to mean – I must work harder; I must get 100% in that test; I must try to please everyone by doing what they ask, or they won't like me.

Henri Nouwen says that the spiritual life is a life in which you gradually learn to listen to a voice that says something else, that says, 'You are the beloved and on you my favour rests.' Jesus heard that voice. He heard that voice when He came out of the Jordan River. What will it mean for us to hear and believe the voice that says,

"You are my beloved son; you are my beloved daughter. I love you with an everlasting love. I have moulded you together in the depths of the earth. I have knitted you in your mother's womb. I've written your name in the palm of my hand. You belong to Me and I belong to you. Don't be afraid. Trust that you are the beloved. That is who you truly are."

One of the reasons for God coming to us in human form, in the person of Jesus, is so that we can know who we truly are. That's what Jesus himself heard on the day of his baptism: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'

For us, it is not a very loud voice because it is an intimate voice. It comes from a very deep place. It is soft and gentle. We have to hear that voice and to claim for ourselves that it speaks the truth.

I recently spent some time with someone who is going through a difficult time, and this person said, 'I don't understand what is going on in my life. I must be crap because these things are happening to me.' Do you hear the voice behind those words? I encouraged her not to believe the voice inside her telling her she is crap – because she's not. I didn't use the words, 'You are loved by God', because the situation was not appropriate, and it would have spiritualised something that was very raw. But, with very few words and an arm around her shoulder, I simply said, 'You are not crap.'

Some people have a hard time believing it. They don't feel wanted. They have lost touch with the truth that they are loved by God. They don't feel their lives match up with what they perceive to be a good Christian life. If enough people around them make them feel not wanted, or that they should go away, it is very difficult to believe the quiet voice that says, 'You are loved.'

Not only does God want us to hear this about ourselves, but those words shape the mission or the work of the church in the world. Last week, I mentioned that the mission of God is summed up in one of Jesus' names - Immanuel, God with us. As individuals, as a church, we are to live in a way that demonstrates that God has come in Jesus to be with us, to be in our world, so that we can say to people and demonstrate that God is with them, whatever they are going through – he loves them, he wants the best for them, he wants his justice, his truth, his grace to be expressed in every part of creation.

Absorb those words. Let them shape you. Let them shape our church and our mission. Immanuel – God with us. You are loved by God.

The second detail that emerges out of this baptism account is in the form of a question. Why does Jesus need to be baptised by John at all? Not because he was a sinner and needed to repent. By going into the water, he was showing his solidarity with people in their need. He identified with people fully. He entered their experience. He didn't stand on the river bank removed, distant, untouched by human life. He becomes one with them, in obedience to his Father's purpose, and in that he receives the anointing of the Spirit in order to accomplish his mission. This was the official start of his ministry.

When you think about your baptism, or the baptisms you have witnessed, do you see that as the beginning of ministry – for yourself and for those whom you have seen baptised? That’s the purpose of the anointing of the Holy Spirit – for ministry and service. I confess that I am not sure that I have explained that sufficiently to people in helping them prepare for baptism. I think as a church we could be more diligent in helping people find their particular form of ministry, which is not only about what is expressed through involvement in the church. The anointing of the Holy Spirit is meant to confer the power or the ability to use your unique gifts, and who you truly are, in your everyday life, in the way that you work, in the help you give to your family, and your neighbours. The anointing of the Holy Spirit on the church is meant to confer the power or the ability to serve God. Every aspect of your life can radiate God’s love and acceptance and presence – wherever you are, and whoever you are with.

Jesus received the affirmation of God when he was in the river. Drenched with water. Immersed in the water’s depths. We have to get into the river of life. Be drenched with the needs of the world, the concerns of the people around you, the burdens they are carrying. Be immersed in them. That’s when we will experience the power of the Holy Spirit supplying grace to meet the need.

You are loved by God – don’t keep it to yourself. Believe it. Live it. Share it.

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Resources:

Henri Nouwen quoted in: <http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/nouwen_3502.htm>