

Isaiah 42:1-9 The Servant, a Light to the Nations
Psalms 29 The Voice of God in a Great Storm /of David
Acts 10:34-43 Gentiles Hear the Good News
Matthew 3:13-17 The Baptism of Jesus

Sermon by Elizabeth Brown

In Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7) Eight days later at his circumcision, this babe was named Jesus by his father, Joseph. On their arrival in Bethlehem, the Wise Men tell Herod of Micah's prophecy that out of Bethlehem "**shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel**" (Matt. 2:6b). Luke, in his Gospel, relates how, in the Temple, Simeon, a holy, righteous man takes the babe in his arms and thanking God, for this privilege, foretells the destiny of the child he is holding: He is to be "**a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.**" (Luke 2:32). During this time, Jesus' cousin, called John, has reached the age of about six months. In his case, it was the prophet Isaiah who had proclaimed that John was to be: **The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'**". He was to be the forerunner of the Messiah!

Thirty years have now passed! John has emerged, from the wilderness, as the first prophet in Israel for some centuries. He is proclaiming: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." And again: "I baptize with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire." (Luke 2: 2a, 11). The people of Jerusalem and all Judea were flocking to John for baptism and the confession of their sins, for to them he was a sign that after a long silence, God was still with them! Also, this was something different from the Jewish ritual cleansings which needed to be performed each time one went to the Temple. The baptism of John was once and for all time - it did not need to be repeated!

Can you picture the scene - a river not much bigger than the Yarra, the crowds flocking to hear John and, following repentance, to be baptised by him for the forgiveness of sins. Suddenly out of the crowd, prepared for baptism in the Jordan, John sees approaching his cousin - a man, who doesn't look different from the others; but he is different! Suddenly John's heart turns over; for he knows, in a flash, that this is the **ONE** for whom he, John, is the forerunner; the **ONE** for whose ministry of judgment and salvation John is to prepare the people; the **LORD** for whom he is to prepare the way!! **Jesus is approaching to be baptized by John!! How can it be??** Can you hear him protesting: No! No! No! It is you who should be baptising me! I cannot do it! I won't do it! You have no need for it! And Jesus, quietly and serenely, as was generally his way, saying: it must be done; you are to do it, for the sake of righteous, for God's design! John obeys and Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River. This fully divine, fully human being has confirmed his humanity by joining others in the baptism of John. Then comes divine intervention for at that moment: "the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'this is my Son, the Beloved with whom I

am well pleased.’ Jesus, fully divine, is blessed and authenticated with symbol and words of love. He is empowered by the Spirit as he prepares to begin his ministry, and his true identity is unambiguously revealed.

We know the pleasure and affirmation we get from our parents’ approval and this will only dimly give us some idea of how Jesus felt at his Father’s affirmation. Here he is a man of thirty, having known for many years that his destiny was to be more than a craftsman; but waiting for a sign to commence his ministry. (How different from today’s culture - if you haven’t made it by thirty years, you are a failure!!) He, who is without sin, joins other human beings in the baptism of John - a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. And God, his Father responds with overwhelming approval - the gift of the Spirit and words of incalculable, immeasurable love and affirmation. And so, empowered by the Spirit, was launched the career and vision of a Revolutionary and a gentle, loving, compassionate Shepherd. What a paradox!! And yet was it so? This is not a man revolting against Rome, the occupying power, for as he once said:

“Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and unto God the things that are God’s” (Luke 20:25);

but here is a man who will revolt against those in authority who belittle, denigrate other human beings; and challenge those who do not put love of God before all else (Matt.10:34-39). Currently I’m reading a book called ‘Raging with Compassion’, by John Swinton of Aberdeen University. In it he refers to the evils against humanity of the 21st century; but it perfectly reflects how this revolutionary shepherd acted. When Jesus was aware of acts against humanity, he was filled with raging compassion and revolted. He challenged the Church authorities, drove the money changers out of the Temple, not because they were money changers; but because they were defrauding the people. He challenged the customs of his society which denigrated women and those who were considered to have inferior jobs such as tax collectors. He associated with many humans who needed healing of body or mind and who were often considered unclean by the church authorities - those with leprosy, the bent woman, the lame, the blind, those with psychiatric problems to name but a few.

And so was launched the career and vision of a revolutionary and a gentle, loving, compassionate Shepherd, who would bind up the bruised reed and fan wavering faith into a consuming fire! He would transform lives through unconditional love and friendship, through healing and forgiveness, through acknowledgment of a human being’s personal worth, whether they be male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile (to quote Paul).

Our baptism is a rite of initiation into the Christian community - we are graciously claimed by God as God’s own and during our lives as God’s people, we are to grow ever more into Christ and to follow his example. Not only are we baptized into Christ but we are also baptized into a community - the Body of Christ - of which this congregation is but a small part. Being baptized into Christ is an admission to this community of faith and the question must be asked, ‘Can one be a Christian if one is not a member of such a community?’

As Paul frequently tells us, **“You belong to Christ.”** In him we live and move and have our being - without him we can have no being.

Are we revolutionaries or compassionate shepherds? Can we rage with compassion? As a congregation we are deeply involved in the Asylum Seeker Project, and we participate in Share and other Uniting Church or inter-Church outreach projects; but how do we go individually

acknowledging the worth of all human beings made in the image of God? I will be eternally grateful for the way you cared for me, when I became ill a year or so ago - gifts of food and flowers, hospital visits and prayers - you were truly caring compassionate shepherds, thank you. I wasn't an isolated example - this is part of the life of this congregation. But how do we relate to all those, who are not part of our network? The famous Scottish theologian, John Baillie, preaching to a student body said: "You and I are men and women first and then students", or professional persons, or office workers or any other role in which one sees oneself and it is as men and women that we relate to all other men and women created equally in the image of God. The differences and inequalities arise through a multitude of factors - the accident of birth, of society and culture, of wealth and education, to name but a few.

Will these influence our Creator when we are required to give an accounting of our lives?? Or will the accounting be: how have you shown my love to your fellow human beings? This isn't something planned; but rather a spontaneous recognition and meeting of another's need or acknowledging the presence of a stranger in one's midst. To the strangers we pass in the street, no matter what the colour of skin, what dress they wear, how different from us they appear, do we acknowledge their presence and smile or greet them, or do we pass on the other side with eyes cast down? This is what I think Baillie was getting at - for the sake of righteousness, avoid superiority and elitism, for in the sight of God we are all equally valuable. It's hard, isn't it to avoid dissonance between what we believe and what we do? We have all put so much time and effort in becoming who we are today (hopefully with God's approval), that our simple, basic humanity tends to be buried. Yet believing without doubt that we are loved by our Creator and gifted with his grace, we can but try!

This is my Son, the Beloved with whom I am well pleased.

A thirty-year old male, an unnoticed stranger in a crowd.

Suddenly this man smiled in greeting and one felt overwhelming love and friendship and acceptance. One looked into his eyes and there one saw the truth of oneself; but more than that those eyes held all the secrets of eternity. We belong to this Son of Man, Son of God. In him we live and move and have our being. How does our being reflect the revolutionary, compassionate Shepherd?