

**Epiphany 1**  
**8/1/2017**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Isaiah 42:1-9**

**Psalm 29**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

**Getting Dirty, Being Washed**

Sermon preached by Rev. Rod Horsfield

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**Introduction:** Remember when going to church meant putting on your best clothes. Some people even had things in their wardrobe that were classified “Sunday best.” Times have changed and people dress more casually not only for going to church but also for the opera. But while fashions may change, civility and gentility are still the marks of the usual church crowd. “Respectable” might still be the word to describe a congregation of Jesus’ disciples today.

Many of us are so used to church being like that, that we’ve come to expect that’s what the crowd that Jesus mixed with was like. But come with me into Matthew’s world and let me show you a different scenario.

**1. The Crowd:** There is a prophet out in the desert preaching a fiery message of repentance because the Kingdom of God is about to break in on their tired old world. Everyone is going out to see him. People from Jerusalem and all over Judea are gathering by the Jordan River to listen to this radical preacher and you wouldn’t believe who was going down into that muddy old river to get their sins washed away!! Pharisees and Sadducees – who are strictly religious and rigorously keep the law. But look closely and see large numbers of ordinary working people. These groups do not usually associate, but today they march together into the desert along with soldiers and the Temple security guards; mothers and prostitutes, tradies and business men as well as those publicans who work to keep their Roman masters happy.

The pious and the profane are here, blue collar and white – what a sight! This human throng, this motley crew, all coming out to hear the announcement by a wild prophet of the coming of God’s kingdom. And to make sure that they are part of it when it comes, **they were baptized by John in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.**

**2. Jesus stands with them:** And there in the water, waiting, stands Jesus. He goes along with the crowd. He jostled his way to the Jordan side by side with all the rest of this motley collection of humanity. Jesus did not ask for a private baptism. He did not wait until everyone else had gone, nor did he disdain the crowd. He comes down with them, stands in the mire and the muck, shoulder to shoulder with prostitute and Pharisee, soldier and Sadducee, standing in solidarity with all who confess their sins. With them, he too receives a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

His sins? Jesus confessing his sins? Has Matthew made a mistake in his story? But right here, at the beginning of his ministry Jesus takes a stand. He stands with the crowd - in solidarity with us sinners. It surprises us – it shocked John the Baptist. Matthew reports, **John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’** And would we prevent him as well? We look around at the people we have to deal with and wonder about the wisdom of Jesus getting too involved with that crowd.

**3. A Story:** There is an incident in our family story that has almost attained the status of myth. We recall it when we get together on family occasions: “Do you remember the day when we went mud sliding?” And everyone laughs – of course we remember. We were on holidays in May on Westernport Bay and it was one of those grey, mild, autumn days Melbourne sometimes has. It had been raining quite heavily when Andrew, our youngest, came running in from the beach and said he had found a great place for a mud slide. So, being a bit bored with the weather we followed him to the side of a bank on the beach where the water had run down exposing the soil. The two boys went first and began tentatively to slide down the hill. Before long I had joined them and we spent an hour or so becoming ever more daring and inventive in finding ways to slide down the muddy hill.

When we had enough we were, as you could imagine, covered in mud. We couldn't go back to the house like this, so we ran across the beach and into the water. We frolicked there washing off as much of the mud as we could before taking off our jeans and tops and having a swim, come wash in the sea.

Then we walked back to the house in our underwear with our clothes wrapped around us as best we could. We remember and still laugh at the incredulous looks we got from a couple of people walking the beach wrapped up in parkas.

As I said it was one of those incidents that is firmly locked into our family's corporate memory. But there is a sequel that I remember and which is the relevant part of the story for this sermon. One of our sons had his current girl friend with him that day. I was aware that she was having great difficulty accepting the mad behaviour, not only of her beau, but of his father as well. Her disapproval was as polite as her discomfort was obvious. I remember thinking – she won't last. She can't identify with us and our strange ways. She held herself aloof from our muddy madness, and I knew she could never really belong to the likes of us. And she didn't.

**4. The baptism of Jesus** is important because it declares to us that Jesus does not hold himself aloof from us. He does not fear getting dirty in his complete solidarity with us. He takes our humanity upon himself completely. The Apostle Paul said, **For our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin.** (I Cor 5:21).

It is important that we remember this as we trace the ministry of Jesus in Matthew's gospel this year. The baptism of Jesus shows us that Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped – to be held on to preserved from the taint of humanity. His baptism, there in the muddy old Jordan, shows that he who shares in God's perfection identifies with us and with our sometimes messy lives.

That identification is important for our faith. We do not worship a God who holds himself aloof but one who is with us in our pain, our struggles, our failures and finally, in our dying.

But this identification with us is also important for the church's mission. Jesus' baptism sets the tone for the way in which we are witnesses to Jesus in the world. We cannot be involved in the mission of Jesus and hold ourselves aloof from the messiness of the life of the world. We cannot be the people of this God and not be in the muck with the crowds that desperately want to discover a gracious God too. And we do it with them. Not as those who have all the answers, or have the right to wield power and lord it over people, but only as those who represent the way of Jesus, the way of serving, suffering love.

**5. Affirmation of Baptism:** In a moment you will be asked to come forward and reaffirm your baptism. The affirmation that “You belong to Christ” will be made. You will be marked with the sign of the cross. Both of these actions declare the truth of Jesus baptism. First, that we belong to Christ by God’s decision and action. The second is the sign that this belonging calls us to an uncommon way of life. We are just beginning to relearn this in the church as we move away from the culture of Christendom and its temptations to the pursuit of success, political power and cultural acceptance. At a time when there is widespread anxiety about the future of the church, we are learning again the way of Jesus. Marked with the sign of the cross we may again become an uncommon people living out Jesus’ way in the life of our world.

**Conclusion:** All this flows from the action of Jesus in choosing to begin his ministry by being baptized by John the Baptist in the River Jordan. Today we align our living with this uncommon way in which God chooses to bring humanity into fellowship with God.

Amen.

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