

Acts 8:14-17

Psalm 29

Luke 3:15-22

Who baptized Jesus?

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

The baptism of Jesus was a job lot. I know that sounds shocking but there it is, at least according to St Luke. Not only that but the celebrant at the baptism of Jesus may or may not have been John the Baptist. It probably was because John was the only known registered Baptist, but who knows, registers being as they were so long ago. John the writer of the gospel according to St John seems to have a clearer idea about the baptizing team. He says that Jesus and his disciples and John (the John we know as the Baptist) were baptizing out in the desert at Aenon near Salim because there was a lot of water there. John's gospel does not have John baptizing Jesus. John's gospel makes a clear distinction between water baptism as performed by John and holy spirit baptism as performed by Jesus. Sorry to bring up these anomalies but I find them interesting, so it is fun to inflict them on a captive audience. I promise to try to make sense of this later.

Today's gospel is from Luke so let's concentrate on him.

Luke says: "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove." (Luke 3:21-22)

Add to that the verse that precedes that statement where Jesus' baptism is simply lumped with all the other baptisms. It looks like John was in prison at the time – "But Herod the ruler, who had been rebuked by him because of Herodias, his brother's wife, and because of all the evil things that Herod had done, added to them all by shutting up John in prison." (Luke 3:19-20) John's gospel disagrees with this. In that gospel the Baptist is not in prison yet.

With all this confusion the church through the ages has taken its lead from Mark and Matthew on this point. They are clear that John baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. John was reluctant and only baptized him on Jesus' insistence.

It is not unusual for various accounts of the same event to look different through different eyes and different politics and philosophies and theologies. But it looks to me as if all of them are grappling with an embarrassing issue for the early church. All the gospels agree that Jesus was baptized, although John leaves out the bit about water. The problem is that all agree that for the Baptizer, baptism was about repentance. Now, if the gospel professes that Christ was without sin and therefore had no need to repent, then, what was Jesus' baptism about? That is a question for systematic theologians. My interest is how these accounts of Jesus' baptism have had an impact on the church's practice of baptism through the ages.

The main point of agreement between all the gospel writers regarding baptism is the bits about sin, water and Spirit. To deal with human sin each sinful person needs to do something about it. That is where repentance comes in. The person's faith community needs to do something about it. That is where the water comes in. For any outcome to be effective, God needs to do something about it. That is where the Holy Spirit comes in.

From earliest accounts of the liturgical life of the church these components have been essential to the celebration of baptism. Ancient testimony tells of catechumens, converts who have undergone instruction in Christian teaching were baptized in a river on Easter Day. They repented then passed from one bank to the other but in the middle a deacon immersed each into the water three times in the name of the Holy Trinity. As they emerged on the other bank the bishop laid hands on their heads praying that they receive the Holy Spirit.

In time, as episcopal regions grew larger so that the bishop could not be on the bank of every river where deacons were performing their part of the ritual, the act of laying on of hands was delayed until the bishop could visit each local church under his charge.

The essentials of this ancient ceremony survive in baptismal liturgies today. Fonts and baptistries have symbolically brought the river into the church. The practice of infant baptism has moved and stretched the components of the ritual. Instead of instruction followed by water then laying on of hands it has been common in western denominations that practice infant baptism for the water followed by instruction then repentance and laying on of hands at confirmation. In episcopal churches the confirmation is still the prerogative of the bishop.

The laying on of hands can look like a bit of an add-on. Indeed, it is and always was. In Acts Luke maintains a strict separation between the water bits and the receiving the Holy Spirit bit. In Acts chapter 8 Peter and John visit a community that have been baptized but still need the Apostles to lay hands on them, so they receive the Holy Spirit. Paul came upon a similar issue in Ephesus in chapter 18. This clunky separation continues in modern church liturgies.

We have so few baptisms celebrated in our congregation we could be excused for being a bit hazy on how our liturgy is ordered. It runs like most western denominations. We do include a scriptural warrant. Our Reformed heritage demands this. Presbyterians didn't do anything unless it was prescribed in scripture. The story of the wedding at Cana is read before a wedding. The institution of the Lord's Supper would be read before the Great Thanksgiving, not included in the prayer. There are seven passages to choose from in the Uniting liturgy.

Then how do we represent the actions of the three players in this sacrament. If we are following the ancient traditions what does the baptismal candidate do, what does the faith community do, what does God do?

The candidate learns about the faith and repents. The congregation confesses the faith of the church reciting the Apostles' Creed with the candidate and the minister pours water three times in the name of the blessed Trinity. God gives the Holy Spirit which is provided visual symbol by the laying on of hands on the candidate's head.

All well and good, but how are we to know what these actions mean. The Uniting Church liturgy is particularly obliging in this regard. After the OK has been given by reading appropriate scripture about Jesus commanding the church to make disciples and baptize them, the minister reads a paragraph that is very helpfully called 'the meaning of baptism'. I want to conclude by reading this statement, but please note that the statement does not duck away from the problem of why Jesus was baptized like I did. Our liturgy brings together all that I have tried to say in succinct and erudite way.

Baptism is Christ's gift.
It is the sign by which the Spirit of God
joins people to Jesus Christ
and incorporates them into his body, the Church.

In his own baptism in the Jordan by John,
Jesus identified himself with humanity
in its brokenness and sin;
that baptism was completed in his death and resurrection.
By God's grace,
baptism plunges us into the faith of Jesus Christ,
so that whatever is his may be called ours.
By water and the Spirit we are claimed as God's own
and set free from the power of sin and death.

Thus, claimed by God
we are given the gift of the Holy Spirit
that we may live as witnesses to Jesus Christ,
share his ministry in the world and grow to maturity,
awaiting with hope the day of our Lord Jesus.
