

Isaiah 42:1-9
Matthew 3:13-17

Beloved!

Sermon preached by Rev. Rob Gotch

In 1990, my wife and I had been married for 8 years, and lived a happy and settled life. We had just purchased a house in the bowl of a quiet court, down behind the Wheelers Hill pub, within walking distance of Jells Park. We were the parents of a boy and a girl, and assumed then that our family was complete, though years later we welcomed another boy and another girl. I was employed as a technical officer in the Telecom Research Labs in Clayton, and my wife had returned to primary teaching. We were regular participants in the life of the Glen Waverley Uniting Church, and involved with a community of young families that met regularly for fellowship and conversation. For the past 35 years, we've been enjoying an annual holiday with two of those families.

I was a naive young man with evangelical tendencies who yearned for moral rectitude, theological certainty and liturgical purity. I considered leaving the Uniting Church to join a Pentecostal tradition in which I could fulfil all righteousness, but something unexpected happened. The prayer and discernment of others pointed me in the direction of ordained ministry. The report of the Presbytery candidates committee suggested that I was not as convinced about my sense of call as those around me but this did not seem to cause me any anxiety. By the end of that year, I was a candidate for the Ministry of the Word and had commenced a most unexpected journey that continues to unfold.

What I didn't understand then, and am yet discovering, is that the righteousness I so desired was not mine to create or possess, but rather is the righteousness of Jesus Christ that he embodies on my behalf. This dynamic becomes clearer when we interpret the baptism of Jesus as confirmation that he is the one who will inaugurate the justice promised by God through the prophets. This is why the location of John the Baptist's ministry is a detail of particular significance. In one of the most important narratives in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Israelites cross the Jordan River on their journey into the Promised Land. Having fled from Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for 40 years, the crossing of the Jordan could be understood as the final act of their captivity.

In John's time the people are captive once again, but not in a distant place; now they're exiled in their own land by the occupying forces of Rome. In the midst of oppression and persecution, John invites people to turn to God. The baptism he offers prepares people for the coming of the Lord; the more powerful one who will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire. Given that he's been proclaiming the arrival of the Lord, John doesn't seem phased when Jesus shows up to be baptized. His only comment:

‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’

John is reluctant to baptise Jesus, but Jesus insists. He knows the historical and theological significance of what John is doing in the Jordan River, and he knows that his own baptism will fulfill all righteousness. It's precisely because he is Emmanuel – God with us – that Jesus joins the queue, waiting his turn.

In his baptism, Jesus is identified as the one of whom the Lord says through Isaiah:

‘Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.’

In his baptism, Jesus embraces God’s call to be the righteous servant who will lead people home, from the wilderness of alienation into the peace of God. In his baptism, the heavens are opened to him and he’s anointed by the Holy Spirit for his messianic vocation, while a voice from heaven declares:

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

Despite their different perspectives about the origins of Jesus, the four gospels all agree about the significance of his baptism. His baptism signals the beginning of his ministry - the public proclamation of the kingdom of heaven that he embodies in acts of sacrificial love, costly service, and ultimately in his death. All righteousness is fulfilled as Jesus is anointed through baptism as God’s begotten Son, becoming sovereign of a kingdom for which he will ultimately be crowned with thorns.

Jesus is baptised into God’s mission of self-giving love that leads him into suffering and death, there to be identified with all human misery and despair. Jesus is baptised into life eternal, as his ministry of self-giving is vindicated by God and revealed to be the way to life for all of creation.

One of the great joys of Christian discipleship is sharing in communal discernment to clarify the implications of our baptism into Christ crucified and risen. The Basis of Union (para 7) explains the baptism of Jesus, and what it means for us:

‘The Uniting Church acknowledges that Christ incorporates people into his body by Baptism. In this way he enables them to participate in his own baptism, which was accomplished once on behalf of all in his death and burial, and which was made available to all when, risen and ascended, he poured out the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Baptism into Christ’s body initiates people into Christ’s life and mission in the world, so that they are united in one fellowship of love, service, suffering and joy, in one family of the Father of all in heaven and earth, and in the power of the one Spirit.’

We are baptised into the death of Jesus to proclaim the righteousness that he fulfills through his own self-giving. And we are baptised into the life of Jesus to participate in the fellowship of his Spirit; to share in the journey of faith, hope and love in which we die to ourselves and live in Christ. Not all of us are elected or ordained for leadership in the church, but we are all called to serve, and the commissioning liturgy reminds us that:

‘Each one of us is given a gift by the Spirit:
and there is no gift without its corresponding service.’

As those baptised into Christ, we listen for the call of the one in whom we live, and move, and have our being; the one who makes us his sisters and brothers in the fellowship of his Spirit; the one who leads us from the wilderness of alienation into the peace of God. Just as he hears the words of divine pride that confirm his identity and send him into ministry, so too does Jesus speak those words to us:

‘You are my beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’

To the God of all grace, who has called us to eternal glory in Christ, be the dominion forever and ever. Amen.
