

The Baptism of Christ, First Sunday after Epiphany

Is 43: 1-7 Ps 29 Acts 8 14-17 Luke 3: 15-22

"...the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah..." Lk 3: 15

More than 2000 years later in our relatively privileged, and comfortable technology-driven world, it is hard to imagine what life was like for people in the society about which our scripture speaks.

Try if you can, to imagine, or perhaps remember, life without comforts of any sort: If you have experienced outback camping with no amenities at all, it was perhaps something like that, only worse.

According to Malina and Rohrbaugh's social science commentary on the synoptic gospels, in the cities of antiquity nearly a third of the infants born alive were dead before the age of 6; by the mid-teens 60% would have died; by mid 20s 75% and 90% of people died by their mid-40s. Perhaps 3% reached their 60s and few people of low status lived out their 30s.

By age 30 most people would have had atrocious health: Teeth were frequently rotten, eyesight gone, and the effects of protein deficiency, internal parasites and poor diet were evident.

When he began his public ministry at about age 30, Jesus was not a young man by the standards of his day and modern assumptions that he was are incorrect. Much of his audience would have been younger than him, disease-ridden and could expect to live about a decade more.

On top of those generally unpleasant life conditions, was the added weight of the hated Roman occupation.

It's perhaps not so hard then, to imagine why the people longed for a Messiah, from Hebrew *mashiah*, "anointed", the expected king of the Davidic line who would deliver Israel from foreign bondage and restore the glories of its golden age. As Jews, they would have been raised on Torah, steeped in the prophecies of a mighty Saviour:

Isaiah 61 1-2:

*The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a]
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,*

Perhaps it's not so hard then, to imagine why the people were filled with expectation and wondering – probably hoping – that John might be **he**. Someone to sweep in and set things right, fix those swear word, swear word Romans and just make it better.

When I began my sermon preparation, this Gospel text really resonated with me. I thought: "Yup, after the year we've had, that's what I'd like and I'm sure others would too: Someone to sweep in and set things right, fix this swear word, swear word Covid, the straining health care sector, the ailing economy and Just. Make. Everything. Better. And while he is about it, maybe also fix our church and restore it to the glories of the golden age after which many people still hanker."

But John was not **the one**.

And, as it turned out, neither was Jesus... Not someone to sweep in and Just. Make. Everything. Better, that is.

Last Sunday was the Feast of the Epiphany, the Second Sunday after Christmas. Nic talked about the way in which Jesus was not the type of Messiah many Jews hoped for because he did not throw out the oppressive Roman rulers. What the people may have preferred – he said – was a cartoon character-type Messiah bursting onto the scene, 7 ft tall all fiery eyes and blazing aggression.

What they got – what we got – as today's Gospel portrays, was an apparent country bumpkin nobody who meekly submitted to the near-indignity of a public baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins offered by a wild-haired, desert weirdo.

The culture of Jesus' day expected people to act in accordance with their birth status so little would have been expected of Jesus as the son of Joseph the carpenter. However, it was still surprising that he, and any Jew, submitted themselves to baptism as it was a common ritual for Gentiles who wanted to become Jews. So, it was like saying "I'm as bad as a heathen Gentile". He needed no repentance or cleansing from sin, and yet, perplexingly, Jesus submitted to this ritual.

In his baptism there is also a surprising turnaround of his low status. *"You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased."* The public designation of Jesus as "Son of God" is an honour statement of the highest order: Here, at the start of his public ministry, this divine stamp of approval lends necessary legitimacy to Jesus' subsequent actions and statements,

The baptism of our Lord is part of the unfolding epiphany, revelation or showing forth of who Jesus is.

And who he is not.

He is not a cartoon character-type Messiah bursting onto the scene, 7 ft tall all fiery eyes and blazing aggression. He does not sweep in and make everything better, as much as the Jews might have wished it and as I might wish it.

However, in the unfolding story that began with the baby sleeping in an animal's feed trough in a smelly stable, he demonstrates that he is "God in skin" to use that phrase again, God who demonstrates that she fully identifies herself with us, our brokenness, our failure, our fears and our worries.

God in human form who – as we know from the cyclical retelling of our faith stories – will march defiant, into the fires of hostility and hatred. Serene despite the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that will be hurled at him, he will disarm their power, and unleash his own Spirit, his energy of love into the world. God who is with us no matter what. And, by our own immersion in his baptism, assures us that that energy of love is in each of us.

Standing here at the beginning of a new year, I am weary and *wary* – of the fires of virus, uncertainty and anxiety that have seemed to rage for so long – too long – and **I long** for things to be better.

What today's brief story reminds me is that our God is with us, and that in the people around me, in community, I am surrounded by people who are "God in skin" to me and in the same way, I am called to be "God in skin to them"; reminded that those words which came from heaven when Jesus was baptised ring in our ears too, and are written on our hearts too:

"You are my child, my beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Amen

Resources

NIV Study Bible

Blue Bible – David Guzik

LaughingBird.net: *Fire and Water* - Nathan Nettleton, *Luke's Baptism of Jesus* - Garry Deverell

Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, Bruce Malina and Richard Rohrbaugh, 1989, Fortress Press

Sunday and HolyDay Liturgies Cycle C, Flor McCarthy, SDB, 1985, Dominican Publications