



# Auckland Community Church

## ***The Baptism of Christ and Our Baptism***

Given by Peter Lineham on the 8th January 2006

**Readings** : Genesis 1:1-5; Acts 19:1-7; Mark 1:4-11.

The passage from Acts is a fascinating story which is the kind that the historian loves. It tells us about a group of people who don't really fit. They are a paradoxical group who have not really caught up with news that must in fact be several years old. They don't seem to have discovered that Jesus is greater and more significant than John; he is the fulfilment of God's promise through John, and he is the saviour of the whole universe. They seem to have heard of Jesus; perhaps even call themselves Jesus disciples, but they are an anomalous group, caught between two dispensations.

But in fact it's perfectly possible, if we indulge (as the historian often has to) in a little speculation. Imagine that some people really were profoundly influenced by John, and that his death has not really shaken their belief that he was a true prophet. All the talk about Jesus, then, they might easily dismiss as of no significance. John is profoundly in the prophetic tradition; he is endued with the power and significance of a message of repentance and transformation.

In many respects John's message is much more natural to believe than the gospel of Jesus. It involves no unlikely miracles, no sacrificial death and dodgy resurrection, no breaking outside of Jewish bounds, but rather a call to go back to the ancient traditions. John knows that there is one day to be a day of the Holy Spirit, but it is not his role to introduce it. It will be the task of the Messiah.

Nevertheless it is a puzzle that they should not even have heard that there is a Holy Spirit. For in fact any one who knows the Old Testament knows about the Holy Spirit. There he is in Genesis chapter one, the Ruach breathing upon the face of the waters. And John had talked about the Holy Spirit's ministry too. But he had talked about that ministry as a ministry that would be given when the coming one appeared. John's ministry in fact prepared people for the Messiah, but did not announce his coming, yet. And if we look carefully at the Greek, I think we can read this as they did not know that the Holy Spirit was present. So John 7:39 explains that there was at the heart of Christianity the expectation of a gift of the Holy Spirit. This was what they didn't know about.

The problem should be a familiar one to us. Many people think vaguely of themselves as Christians but they have not progressed beyond the baby at Bethlehem. Jesus hasn't even grown up to his baptism, and they have no idea of the true nature of Christianity. Similarly many a person today may come along to church, even call themselves Christian, but be in exactly the same position as these disciples of John. Such people have a part of the truth, but they've actually missed the "goods".

What are these goods? Here we enter a further debate. Did Paul notice, as some claim, the absence of charismatic gifts and experiences from the group of disciples, which made him suspicious as to the reality of their Christianity? But I think the core is that Paul sensed the absence of the presence and the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, freeing and filling them with the presence of the risen Jesus.

Paul actually guessed that something was profoundly wrong when he looked at them and saw something was missing. What was it that was missing? I think it is not unreasonable to suggest that their Christianity lacked some dimensions that Paul considered normal

and that it likely to have been some sense of the presence of God within them. That made him think about their baptism.

The connection may not be obvious to you, but it is if you look carefully at the text in Mark and compare it with what Jesus taught about Christian baptism. John's baptism, as Paul crisply put it, simply is a seal on your desire to get back to God. But Christian baptism is in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is symbolically the endowment of the Holy Spirit in the believer and it is the promise that we are now bound into Christ. Incidentally it also seems a strong argument for believers' baptism, because what sense would this conversation make if there had been a practice of infant baptism then?

So logically Paul does not accept the validity of their baptism and he now re-baptises them, and supplements it to supply what they have not understood or expected or experienced. They receive the endowment of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost caught up on them as John Stott puts it.

This passage is in fact a favourite with Pentecostal Christians. Using the Authorised version of the Bible, they read it as saying that the Holy Spirit is given subsequent to baptism. But in fact the very opposite is being said. Paul cannot conceive of an unbaptised Christian, and he cannot conceive of a Christian without the Holy Spirit either. How do we know that the Holy Spirit is present in us? Through the powerful presence of our God, but let's not circumscribe the way. Some do indeed speak in tongues and prophesy. Others have an empowerment for other ministry. All of us have the powerful sense of God's nearness. So I would argue that we do not have to replicate the Pentecostal experience exactly.

So that leaves a very juicy little theological problem for us. What was the significance of the baptism that John gave to Jesus? It can't have been for repentance, after all. Ok, so perhaps Jesus was expressing his link with John, but what sense does it have in itself? Mark mentions two elements. Firstly Jesus is baptised with the Holy Spirit. John predicts that there is one coming who will baptise with the Holy Spirit. Then Jesus sees the Holy Spirit coming as a dove, and this suggests that he is the one. Secondly there is a voice from heaven affirming Jesus special sonship; his special relationship with God.

The design of the passage clearly suggests that he will now be able to offer this to others. And read against these verses it clearly teaches that baptism is a powerful picture of the nature of being a Christian; it is the receiving of the life of God and the commission of God on our lives.

Now the puzzle. Mark doesn't have an incarnation story. Is this his equivalent? Does he believe in adoptionism, that in some sense at this point Jesus took on the power of God that he had not previously known? In the nineteenth century Edward Irving, the progenitor of the Pentecostals argued that the gift of the Spirit to Christ in baptism gave him the practical realisation of his divine life. But more likely is that Mark teaches that Jesus at this point found his appointment in life; his purpose and task.

So what has this to say to disciples like you and me? That quite simply you have not received enough if you have not experienced the Holy Spirit, and heard the voice of God telling you that you are his child. I pray that you will hear this voice tonight. Repentance, faith, baptism with water and the gift of the Spirit are the four strong marks of the Spirit. Let Jesus baptism inspire us to expect full value from our Christianity.