

Radical Kingdom

Matthew 3:13-17

Last week, we saw the Magi visiting the infant Jesus. This week we skip forward about 30 years to his baptism in the River Jordan. After we've been attending church for a few years, this becomes a very familiar story. "Ah yes," we say, "this is the start of Jesus' public ministry"; but if we leave it there, then in our familiarity we've forgotten what a radical event this was, and what radical implications it has for us.



Why is it radical? What's so very different about it? After all, the Jews already knew all about ritual washing for purity before you took your sacrifice to the temple. And over the years, the rabbis had even added a "baptizo" or full immersion washing, seven days after circumcision for any God-fearing Gentile who wanted to join the community of the people of Israel. But what we see here has nothing to do with the temple nor the priests.

Instead we see John, something of a wild man, living in the desert on a weird diet of locusts and honey, and wrapped in camel hair against the cold desert nights. He's about half way through his year of living dangerously before King Herod has him jailed, and the crowds are flocking to him. What happens today is no quiet act of ritual purity, nor a sign of admission into the community.



John's message is to those who think they are already part of the Chosen People, and it's radical: "Repent". Turn around! Do a 180. You're going the wrong way. This is quite an alternative, almost a direct attack on the temple system. No wonder the scribes and Pharisees have been down to check him out — only to be publicly accused of being a brood of poisonous snakes, abusing God's people, destined for God's wrath!

So it's not to the temple, but to this wild man in the desert, that Jesus comes. And we're told he comes from Galilee, which is another way of saying he's something of a fringe dweller. Galilee is about 100km north of Jerusalem, and while it was still predominantly Jewish, Upper Galilee is border country that Matthew later refers to as Galilee of the Gentiles. So the young man from up-country comes amongst the crowds to the wild man at the river.

John comes face to face with his cousin Jesus, and it stops him in his tracks. Here is God's



chosen one, the one person in all of time who does not need to turn back from the kingdom of Self and return to God. Surely it's the Chosen One who should wash us clean? But when John asks what's going on, Jesus gives this fascinating reply: "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness." For the teachers of the Law at the time, you achieved righteousness by carrying out specified procedures such as a ritual cleansing followed by a temple sacrifice. But nothing like that is happening amongst the crowds at the river. Jesus has a much bigger picture in mind.

The only source for all righteousness is, of course, God. So to "fulfil all righteousness" is to do each thing that is necessary for us to be right with God. Here's how The Message tries to capture the meaning here: "God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." The baptism of Jesus is a key turning point in God's plan for redemption and justice. It was right for John to baptise Jesus, to do what God considered right in order to bring people back into a right relationship with him.

And it seems to hinge around identification. The first thing to note is that Jesus, the sinless one who has no need of repentance, nevertheless identifies with the sinners going down into the river, becomes one with them, and submits to the same baptism, as part of God's work. He becomes one of us. At the very least, he wanted everyone to know that he was human and that he understood all about sin and its effect on people's lives.



What makes this radical, of course, is who it is that becomes one of us. And lest there be any misunderstanding, after 400 years of silence since the last of the prophets, God speaks directly. The heavens are ripped open (the Greek word is "skizo", to rip), the Father identifies the Son, affirms him as beloved, and anoints him with the Holy Spirit. Here, in this River experience, we are seeing the Triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit, acting as one. And from this moment, we can

speak of Jesus as the anointed one. The Greek word for "anointed" is "Christos" or Christ, and the equivalent Hebrew word is "Messiah". So in this baptism, Jesus is the Christ. And remembering that, from earliest times, a ceremonial anointing was used to identify a new king of Israel, he is Christ the King. Our king, come amongst us, come to save us. The Messiah. Thanks be to God! It's Good News.

Another radical aspect of this Good News is its timing. In the old temple system, you performed acts of righteousness first, to earn God's favour as a result. But here the order is reversed: Before Jesus had told a single story or had healed a single person, before Jesus remains faithful to his task as Saviour, before he speaks about God's love and forgiveness, in fact, before he does anything, there is affirmation. God speaks those longed for words, "You are my own dear Son. I am pleased with you".



Now, when we fulfil Christ's command to baptise, as we did for Nicolas in the 8:30 service this morning, we echo all three elements from this great River experience of God's blessing: water of course; the Word of God; and anointing with oil.



And just as God affirmed Jesus at the beginning of his ministry, so also he affirms his relationship with us, even before we are able to do anything that we might think would earn God's favour. In grace he says to us, "You are my dear child and that pleases me".

And the radical wonder of it all is that each day God renews his love for us, and each day he speaks to us tender words about who we are, how much we are loved, and encourages us to be who we are – God's children who share the love of God in words and acts of kindness in a world that badly needs all the positive input that it can get. That's part of the covenant that God has established with us – to give to others the same kind of love and forgiveness that he has given to us.



Because when we were baptised, a tremendously intimate relationship was established between Christ and us. The implications of this are immense, truly radical. We are to let his thoughts direct our thoughts, his mind control our mind, his concerns be our concerns. And it's a daily choice.



Now, He is Lord for us, instead of our Kingdom of Self. Now, we will turn around and be outward looking, focussing on the needs of others instead of our Selves and our wants. It means we will love one another radically, even though we recognise that as long as we live here on this earth, that we will constantly be dealing with the results of sin. So we will be forgiving of one another; and at the same time seeking to overcome weakness so that we do not cause offence and hardship.

And even though we fail to keep up our end of the deal, God's love always remains unconditional – it always affirms us, it always nurtures us, and calls us again to live as one of God's dearly loved children.

But one thing more to remember: if we say that The River experience marks the beginning of Christ's public ministry, we're using a kind of shorthand that's not quite accurate.



Because what happened next, we recall, is not his public ministry, but being led by the Spirit off into the wilderness for 40 days of fasting and wild beasts and wrestling with temptation.

First The River, then The Wilderness. And our own lives can be rather like that, too.

Like Jesus, we experience both The River and The Wilderness.

At The River, whatever that represents for us, we are surrounded by community and given new life and called beloved. God is near. And it's beautiful. And we need it. But it's not the whole picture.

Sometimes we'd like to treat Christianity, or being "spiritual", as a Wilderness avoidance program. As though finding oneself in the Wilderness is a failure.

If we're struggling with depression or illness or going through some hardship where nothing seems to be working, then we label that time as "bad". Or we think we must be doing something wrong. Sometimes that's true but sometimes ... it's just The Wilderness.



And here's another radical thing. As much as I need to hear that I'm beloved, and to be surrounded by community, and to be made new, and we all need that, but as much as I need that, I never gained any wisdom from things going really well at The River. Because The River fills the heart, and that's important; but it's The Wilderness that brings wisdom.



You can't buy wisdom. It's always been found in The Wilderness. Look at the order of things – at The River Jesus is baptised and called God's beloved, after which he's cast into The Wilderness for a good long while. And it's only THEN that he begins teaching and healing. See, Jesus doesn't begin teaching and healing until after he's gone through 40 days of Satan, wild beasts and angels. So why should we think of our Wilderness as a personal failure if Jesus' Wilderness gave him what was needed to heal and to teach?

Perhaps it's because we might have picked a rather anaemic view of God.

We might imagine that God is only found at The River times in life – only found in the moments of renewal and elation and blessedness. In other words, we might think that God is only close to us when we feel close to God. But that's not true. Our feelings about God have precious little to do with God's actual nearness to us. Sometimes God's nearness to us is also found in the way that God creates wisdom out of our wilderness experiences. God's nearness to us, is just as real in the blessings of The River as it is in the struggles of The Wilderness. And despite what our culture says, how we feel doesn't really matter. Not in this case.



Maybe today you are struggling. Maybe you are in The Wilderness of wild beasts and angels. But the wisdom is coming. And after that, The River, so that your heart might again be filled. That's the life of the baptised. The River, then The Wilderness, then The River. In other words, this whole thing has always been about daily death and resurrection.

Or maybe this morning you feel as though you are at The River, experiencing community and God and new birth. That's great. AND The Wilderness is surely coming – and when it does, God will be just as near to you.



THAT'S the baptismal life of wild beasts and angels. Where we get to experience the Holy, the transcendent and the heart filling at the River. And we also experience the Wilderness of isolation and fear and uncertainty through which we gain wisdom and perhaps, perhaps like Jesus even the ability to teach and to heal and to help. But regardless of how it all feels, God is present and wants to be known in all of it, River and Wilderness. And that is radical, and for all of us, it is truly Good News.

Amen.

This address combines excerpts and concepts from the following sermons:

Pastor Stephen van der Hoek, <http://stephenvdh.blogspot.com.au/2011/01/baptism-of-our-lord-matthew-313-17-9.html>

Pastor Roger Atze, <http://rmatze.blogspot.com.au/2008/01/matthew-313-17.html?m=1>

Author not attributed (LCA Worship Resources website), <http://cowadmin.s3.amazonaws.com/worship/cowadmin/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/sermon-matt-3-13-17-year-a-epiphany-1.docx>

Pastor Vince Gerhardy, http://www.gerhardy.id.au/epiph1_14.html

Pastor Heath Pakullus, <http://friarpuk.blogspot.com.au/2008/01/the-baptism-of-our-lord-epiphany-1.html?m=1>

Pastor Vince Gerhardy, http://www.gerhardy.id.au/epiph1_08.htm

Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber (ELCA), <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/01/wild-beasts-and-sheet-cake-a-sermon-for-baptism-of-our-lord/>

Additional insights gained from:

Rev Canon David Kennedy (Durham Anglican Cathedral), <https://www.durhamcathedral.co.uk/worshipandmusic/sermon-archive/jesus-baptism-and-our-baptism>

Rev Alan Brehm, <http://thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com.au/2014/01/shining-light-into-darkness.html>

Rev Marc Pitman, <http://marcpitman.com/misc/a-sermon-on-the-baptism-of-jesus/>