

Sermon for the First Sunday after Epiphany, Year A, Baptism of Our Lord The Text: Matthew 3:13-17

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our heavenly Father, through the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Matthew 3:13-17 (ESV)

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness.” Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

Dear heavenly Father, send your Holy Spirit on us so that we might rejoice in the way you use water for your holy purpose of cleansing and adoption through baptism into your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's a known fact water can make dirty things clean, but it can also make clean things dirty.

Take for example floodwaters. They can cause damage and leave a lot of mess behind. The stinky silt and mud sticks to the ground and makes walking through it hazardous. Running floodwater digs away at foundations, fences, and roads; leaving holes and chasms. Anything touched by floodwaters is usually ruined.

The irony is; what do we often use to clean up after such a mess left behind by water? We use more water! We use water to wash away silt and mud. We use water to wash our muddy clothes and cars and properties. So, water can bring mess and muck, but water can also be used for cleaning.

In our text for today (which happens in the wilderness alongside the river Jordan), John the Baptist was using water to clean God's people. In fact, 'to baptise' means to wash or purify something, but instead of sitting there in his camel-hair dinner jacket doing everyone's dishes and dirty laundry, he was washing and purifying people in preparation for the coming Messiah.

But before you get a picture of John washing people's hair or scrubbing behind people's ears, he was using water to wash their sins away.

You see, the invitation John gave was for people to repent and be baptised, that is, to turn away from, and confess their sinful thoughts, words, and actions, and have those same thoughts, words, and actions washed away by water so the people would be holy for the coming of the Messiah.

This washing with water continued an old biblical teaching where there were two ways to wash or purify something in order to make it pure for God's holy purposes.

The first method of cleansing was passing it through fire. But if it was going to burn in fire, then the alternate way of washing with water was to be used in order to purify it.

It makes sense that, since we humans don't go so well in fire, the obvious way for us to be washed and purified is washing through water. Therefore, John was following God's instructions to wash the people of their sins with water. It was a spiritual washing using the physical means of water used together with the teachings of the Word of God.

So the picture we have is: here's John, reminding people of their sins and urging them to repent and be baptised so they could be clean and holy for the time when the coming One arrives who

will take away the sins of the whole world: but then the next person to step forward to be baptised is...the man Jesus!

Now, remember, John and Jesus were related. John knew all about Jesus. When the pregnant Mary (with Jesus in her womb) met the pregnant Elizabeth (who had John in her womb), the baby John leaped inside her. John knew Jesus to be the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world, and here he stands in front of John to be baptized. This puzzles John!

You see, this baptism was for those who have sinned, for those who repent of their sins, and for those who need to be washed of their sin. But Jesus isn't a sinner. He had nothing to confess. He has no sinful thoughts, words and actions. Although he is fully human and so is like us in every way, the only (and very significant) difference is; Jesus wasn't born with the taint of sin that infects everything we do.

So, what's John to do? This baptism was a baptism of repentance, but Jesus doesn't need to repent because he has nothing to repent of. Even though John had refused to baptise the self-righteous Pharisees (who didn't think they needed repenting), here stands the only One who truly has nothing to repent of!

John realises Jesus doesn't need to be baptised because he's already clean, pure, and holy. He's already been set aside for God's holy purposes. He's already bearing the fruit in keeping with repentance because he was already bearing the right fruit! So, in fact, if anything, John needs to be baptised by Jesus, and he tells him so!

But Jesus tells him to leave it this way for now. It's fitting and right that he be baptised *in order to fulfil all righteousness*—to make everything right and fulfil the will of God, right there in the water of baptism. There in the Jordan, Jesus fully identified with us sinners, and in those very waters began his ministry of taking the sin of the world upon himself, so that his sacrificial death on the cross would pay the full penalty of it.

How does this happen? Remember—water makes dirty things clean and clean things dirty.

Therefore, if these baptismal waters were washing away the sins of sinners to make them clean and holy, what would you expect to happen when the pure and holy One is placed in the same water?

Well it's here when Jesus was baptised that the great exchange took place. In baptism you're washed of your sins, and those sins are taken by Jesus. The sinful people like you and me become pure, clean and holy, while the pure, clean and holy One of God becomes the bearer of our sin.

But you might argue that you weren't baptised in the Jordan River where Jesus was baptised, so how can baptism using ordinary water from out of the tap work the same way?

Well, remember, it's not just the water which does this great and mysterious exchange, but it's water used together with the Word of God, and our faith which trusts the Word of God when it's used this way.

In this way, every baptism which uses water together with the Word of God, which is received through faith, is now part of this great exchange of sin. Faith trusts what God promises in this action of baptismal washing. Here in baptism our sins are washed away because Jesus takes on all our sins of thought, word, and deed and receives the punishment we deserve for them on the cross.

Therefore, although Jesus stands sinless before John the Baptist and so didn't need to be baptised, it was through his baptism for the sake of all *righteousness* where Jesus becomes the

greatest sinner of all; not because he was a sinner himself, but because he bore the sins of the whole world, including yours and mine.

So here he takes his place, being baptised among sinners, and will later take his place and die between sinners on the cross. Here God comes down to us to make things right and good through the work of Jesus Christ, which begins here at his baptism.

He continues to enact this cleansing work among us as we're reminded of our baptism when we speak his holy name at the beginning of worship, when we repent of our sins and hear his gracious and undeserving words of forgiveness, and when he welcomes us at his holy banqueting table as forgiven and holy people of God through faith.

Here we celebrate the fact God's goodness, love, mercy and righteousness is greater than our capacity to sin!

But wait, there's more!

You see, something else happens which changes John's baptism of repentance into something new.

We hear the heavens open, and the Holy Spirit comes down from the newly opened heavens to rest on Jesus in the form of a dove.

Here the Holy Spirit *came down* and *rested* on Jesus, reaffirming he is the loved, chosen, and well-approved Servant and Son of God. He is now the font of the Holy Spirit, which means we come to the incarnate Jesus Christ to receive his Spirit so that we may live a life of righteousness. We do this so that, with the Holy Spirit's help, we're able to do the good, perfect, and salutary will of God.

At the same time, the voice of God the Father (who completes the Holy Trinity miraculously present at this world-changing baptismal event), declares this Jesus to be his priceless Son, with whom he's deeply pleased.

Amazingly, much of the same sentiment is conveyed to each of us in our own baptism, as he adopts us as his holy and dearly loved children, speaking his words of love and pleasure over us as we fulfil his will; his holy will and command that we would be baptised and continually learn from his Words and ways on how to live as his holy children.

So here, when Jesus was baptised, baptism itself was changed. It's no longer a simple washing, but it's a means of the Holy Spirit which brings about forgiveness of sins, redeems from death and the devil, and gives eternal salvation to all who believe it, as the Word and promises of God declare.

For this reason we can rejoice and thank God for all the gifts we receive from our baptism into Christ Jesus, so that we can say or even sing:

"Jesus loves me, this I know,
for his washing tells me so.
Baptised ones to him belong;
we are weak, but he is strong."