

Passing the baton

One characteristic of human beings is the way in which we are inspired by certain causes. Some are just community things SHEERAN, like being fans of a pop star or a football club and as part of that support we buy all sorts of fan stuff. I wonder how many Ed Sheeran Ipswich supporters have the 17 shirt?

People often get behind causes that matter to them and they are prepared to go to whatever lengths to support it, even if it costs them their lives. SPARTACUS CLIP To sacrifice one's life for others, or being prepared to do so is either the greatest human act, or depending on the nature of the cause, one of the greatest follies.

COMMUNION

We thought last week of the life-changing faith that we have and the risks that some are prepared to take to follow Jesus, sometimes even as far as losing their lives. Even here today we identify with Jesus and have His symbols with us. CROSS – we use the cross to identify our allegiance – but two also with the two God-given signs – communion and baptism.

Our story today has much to do with allegiance and symbolism, as John baptises Jesus in the river Jordan. We see in this story how the idea of baptism which had its origins in Judaism, changed to reflect what God was revealing in the coming of the Messiah. So, what did the baptism of John actually signify? It was a sign – an act demonstrating the truths of God in the lives of those who followed John the Baptist. There are three elements to it

A mark of repentance

John's message was a call to sanctify themselves before God because of their personal sin and because of the sins of their society. So we read that: VERSE *Confessing their sins, they were baptised by him in the River Jordan.* There is a Jewish symbolism of cleansing here. Ritual cleansing called *tvila* had been practised since the Exile where people were immersed for ritual purity either in SPECIAL PLACES called *mikva*, or in year-round watercourses such as the River Jordan. By the first century, it had also become a condition for Gentile converts to Judaism to be baptised, again as a purity ritual as well as an initiation rite as a proselyte to Judaism.

So, immersing people in bodies of water for cleansing, for repentance and to initiate people into a new way was a well-established practice. John's baptism morphed this principle, calling on the people to repent to turn away from their sin and the corrupt decadence of the religious elite like the Pharisees and Sadducees and cleanse their lives as a preparation for the coming Messiah because judgement was coming on all those living in disobedience – all those not living properly when Messiah comes to rule: VERSE 12

His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.'

A mark of initiation

But John's baptism signified more than this. It involved more than the Jewish idea of purification. It was an initiation, not a proselyte's initiation, but a commitment to a movement led by John to prepare for the Messiah whose coming was imminent. VERSES 1-2 *In those days John the Baptist*

came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

A mark of expectation

John was prophesied by Isaiah as quoted in our reading this morning. The expectation was that the Messiah was to take them to the "next level" as it were, in bringing them into a closer relationship with God. John said: VERSE 11 *I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

That was the expectation – then one day it all came true! Jesus arrived!

And now we have this scene where John is faced with Jesus. He knew who Jesus was – they were related. We know that John was sure that Jesus was someone special because he refused initially to baptise Him because he knew it should be the other way around. But did he know at that point that Jesus was the expected Messiah? That's a reflection and discussion question this week. To John, Jesus didn't need baptising – He didn't need to repent of anything. If he wasn't certain that Jesus was the Messiah before the baptism – he sure was afterwards!

So why did Jesus come to be baptised if He didn't need to? Jesus actually gives us the reason: *'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.'* In the NIV it comes across a little obscurely and other translations give the flavour of what Jesus meant

15 But Jesus said, "It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires." So John agreed to baptize him. NLT

15 But Jesus insisted. "Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism." So John did it. MSG

Jesus' baptism was what God required – God's righteous purposes were going to be worked out in Jesus' life. Jesus' own baptism was the baptism of John the Baptist but it was the pinnacle of John's ministry and the start of the ministry of Jesus

JESUS' OWN BAPTISM HAD ALL THE SAME ELEMENTS AS JOHN'S.

John's baptism was one of preparing for the revealing of the Messiah. Now, Jesus' baptism was revealing Him as the expected Messiah, with the same three elements – repentance, initiation and expectation

Repentance - He was to bring salvation

Jesus didn't need to repent of anything. He did no sin, knew no sin. So how could He repent? The answer is what we explored when I started. In being baptised Jesus identified with us, even though he wasn't a sinner. He stood with us, alongside us. Many human beings stand and even die for causes in which they deeply believe. As we know, some causes people stand and even die for are evil, like ISIS, or just and futile like Spartacus. For Jesus, identifying fully with us meant that, in his struggle on the cross which we mark today, he ushered in God's righteousness, by opening a way that all may come to repentance. So Jesus' baptism was one of repentance because by identifying with us as human, He was going to turn our race around (which is what repentance means) by his work on the cross.

Initiation – It was to start God's work of bringing in righteousness

And for Jesus this was the “official” start of His ministry. There was some continuity with John. He had the same values of John – calling people to repentance, turning away from the broken values of the religious system of Judaism at that time and committing themselves to serving God’s purposes. His ministry culminated in the cross, because in the sacrifice of Jesus, God’s righteous purposes were satisfied so that we may find forgiveness, reconciliation and be part of God’s future hope.

John Piper puts it this way QUOTE

The fact that participating in a baptism of repentance even though he had no sins to repent of, shows that the righteousness he wanted to fulfil was the righteousness required not of himself, but of every sinful man (and woman).

Of course, we can see in Jesus’ immersion, a picture that went into Christian baptism. John introduced Jesus in this way in John 1

‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, “A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.” I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptising with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.’

And what happened to sacrificial lambs? They were slaughtered for the sins of others. Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world and we are here today to remember where that baptism led to – the cross and His broken body and shed blood.

Expectation - He was to bring in God’s rule and reign

John’s baptism was about expectation of the coming Messiah. Jesus preached in much the same vein as John as we know from the Gospels, but with one change. He was the Messiah, so He focussed on the Kingdom of God because as Messiah He was bringing God’s rule and reign to this world. And we’ll explore that a little more next time as we look how Jesus increased and John decreased.

THE AFFIRMATION OF FATHER, SON AND SPIRIT

For John the moment of revelation of the Messiah was as Jesus was baptised. *As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’*

As an aside, this is one of the great Trinitarian verses in the Bible.

PASSING THE BATON

It was the culmination of John’s ministry. In this baptism, the baton had been passed from one to the other – now it would be Jesus, the Messiah that would speak of repentance, call out the religious leaders for their hypocrisy, that would show by works of power He was Messiah and bring in the expectation of God’s rule.

We’ll explore that more next time, but for now we celebrate our Saviour Jesus, who died and has risen and glorified. As His disciples, we affirm Him. He identified with us and died for us, and we identify with Him today. We affirm the symbols of our faith – we have thought of baptism – but of course we have bread and wine before us. Let’s remember and give thanks and examine our lives

as we come before Him now. (Here's a song about Jesus being revealed as God's righteousness – His means of salvation.)

(Video Song)

Communion

23 For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said,

'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.'

25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, ***'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'*** 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Prayer of thanksgiving for the broken body and shed blood of Jesus

Father, thank you that we have been able to feed on bread and drink from the cup this morning and remember Your Son who was crucified, died and is risen. May we be empowered by the Spirit to live His risen life.

We ask this in Jesus' name

Amen.

Fellowship Prayers – open prayers

For Reflection & Discussion

Read Matthew 3:1-17 and John 1:29-34

1. John and Jesus were related and knew one another. How much do you think John understood that Jesus was the Messiah before the baptism?
2. How much of John's baptism and the baptism of Jesus is in your understanding of what Christian baptism is? (*We shall be looking at this further next week.*)
3. What do the ministries of John the Baptist and Jesus tell us about how God calls and uses people in His service?
4. We know something of the lives of both John and Jesus before their public ministries. What may we learn of the types of people God calls to serve Him? What do their characters tell us about their commitment to service?
5. What do you think we can learn from these two about our own service for God?