

THE SHADOW OF THE CROSS: JESUS' BAPTISM

Matthew 3:1–17

It's four weeks to Easter Sunday and I want to focus our thoughts on two passages in which we see the shadow of the cross. We are accustomed to thinking about the shadow of Calvary falling across the Upper Room and the Garden of Gethsemane but I want to take you back much further than that. The first passage is the account of Jesus' baptism and next week we will look at his temptation.

Why was Jesus baptised? It's a bit of a mystery. It was certainly a mystery to John the Baptist as our reading from Matthew chapter 3 makes clear. Let's think for a moment about the ministry of John the Baptist and what it meant.

Verses 1 and 2. 'In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."' John was a man with a message and his baptism was closely linked to that message. We can detect two elements in his message, neatly summarised in verse 2. One focuses on earth. The other focuses on heaven. One reveals something about us. The other reveals something about God. One reminds us of human weakness and failure. The other reminds us of divine power and God's demands.

Firstly, then, 'Repent.' Repentance is more than changing your mind. Repentance is more than feeling sorry for what you've done. Repentance includes these things but it also means a radical transformation, a complete turnaround.

Imagine you want to drive to Warwick and you decide to go A45/A46. You make your way to the big interchange and for some reason you take the wrong exit and find yourself on the way to Ryton and London. You may feel very sorry about the mistake but that's not repentance. You may change your mind and wish you hadn't gone wrong but that's not repentance. As you travel along you find that roadworks have made a U-turn very difficult, but if you are going to get to Warwick via the A46 there comes a point where you've got to turn around, get on the other carriageway and start going in the opposite direction. That's repentance: not just regret or a change of heart but an active change of direction.

God's message through John the Baptist was that his own people, the Jews, were heading in the wrong direction. Their sins were leading them away from God and away from good. What kind of things were they doing? Luke tells us it had to do with having too many possessions. It had to do with being greedy. It had to do with telling lies about people and believing lies about people. It had to do with dishonesty and cheating. It had to do with pretending to be religious as a cover up for a selfish life.

God saw it and God hated it and God said, 'It must stop.' Adjust your outlook so that giving becomes more important than getting. Don't take delight in people's sins but pray for their souls. Be scrupulously honest. Be unerringly sincere. Turn around. Change your direction. Change your way of life. Repent. John sums it up in verse 8. 'Produce fruit in keeping with repentance,' or as the Contemporary English Version translates it, 'Do something to show that you have really given up your sins.'

John's message exposed human weakness and sin and called for change. The second part of John's message was, 'The kingdom of heaven is near.' The kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are the same thing. It's summed up in the Old Testament words, 'The LORD reigns.' The kingdom of God is not a geographical area or a political system. It is the active rule of God in our lives, in our neighbourhoods, in our communities. Jesus taught the disciples to pray, 'Your kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.' That means, 'Rule earth the way you rule heaven; rule us the way you rule the angels.'

There are two people who have a big influence on the events in my life. One is the

Prime Minister, the other is my wife. One is Mr Blair, the other is Mrs Macnair. Now which wields the greater influence? We might look at their relative status in life and conclude that it must be Tony Blair. After all, he is the leader of the government, arguably the most powerful person in the country. But the reality is that in my life my wife has a far greater influence, and I for one am very pleased that she does.

Now, the kingdom of heaven, the rule of God in my life and your life: which is it more like? Is it like the influence of the Prime Minister, much greater in theory, but much less in reality? Or is it interaction in real terms, involvement in the nitty gritty of every-day life? You see, in the kingdom of heaven God is king. When you've turned around and forsaken your sin you must bow the knee to God and crown him as your king.

These were the two main elements in John's preaching. Get ready because the king is coming, heaven's king, God himself. As a sign of your repentance, the big turnaround in which you leave your sin and go for goodness, you must be baptised. Have a big bath in the River Jordan. Wash those dirty sins away and start afresh. Get clean, get ready for God. The king is coming.

Verse 11. 'I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.' A few weeks ago at our baptismal service I gave a little illustration of the power of water to make things clean. When my hands got really dirty it wasn't soap or sponges or scrubbing brushes or towels that got them clean. In fact, my hands just made them dirty as well. The thing that really gets everything clean is water. That's the whole point of baptism in water. It's an illustration of getting clean, spiritually.

'Now,' John says, 'I baptise you with water but after me is coming someone more powerful, the king himself. I'm not worthy even to carry his sandals, that's how much greater he is than me.' And remember that the crowds thought John the Baptist was a very great prophet, one like the old prophets, Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and so on. John says, in effect, 'You think I'm great. You ain't seen nothing yet.' I baptise with water but he will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire.'

I don't know how pure the gold is in this wedding ring on my left hand. I do know that for more than 30 years it's been in and out of water at least ten times a day but that hasn't made the gold one iota more pure. There's only one way to purify gold and that's with fire. John says, 'I baptise you with water, but when *he* comes, the coming king, the ruler of the kingdom of heaven, he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire.' That's how much greater he is.

That's the context of the baptism of Jesus and it gives us more of an insight into the reaction which John had. Verses 13, 14. 'Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptised by you, and are *you* coming to me?"'

Jesus gave a reply which perhaps doesn't shed much light on the mystery. 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.' Jesus was saying, 'Just do it. It's the right thing for both of us. In this way it will be the right thing from every angle.' And so John gave in.

Whichever way you look at it the baptism of Jesus was a mystery. Look at it from the angle of human sin. Jesus had no sin to repent of. Look at it from the angle of divine sovereignty. The kingdom is near meant Jesus is coming. The kingdom is here meant simply Jesus has come.

So why did Jesus insist on being baptised? What was he trying to say, to show? At the outset, at the very start of his public ministry, he was shining a light in which the shadow of the cross could be clearly seen.

He was without sin; yet he came to sinners. He identified with sinners. And finally he died for sinners. He actually took our sins in his own body on the tree and died as if all those sins really were his own. That act of baptism stood clearly for washing. But Jesus gave it a new meaning. For him it was a symbol of dying, giving himself as a sacrifice for our sins.

The cross was not an afterthought. It was not a cosmic blunder. It was there in Old Testament prophecy. It may not have registered with most people but it was there unmistakably. And the shadow of the cross stretched back to Jesus' baptism in the River Jordan.

But what of the other half of John's message, the sovereign rule of God, the coming of the kingdom of heaven? Could this enigmatic suffering servant really be the Son of God? The answer was not slow in coming.

Verses 16 and 17. '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 lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."'

Those of you who are familiar with the older translations will know that modern versions tend to leave out a word that's difficult to translate. It's the word 'behold'. He went up out of the water and behold heaven was opened ... and behold a voice from heaven. It's an archaic word, not one we use today. So how should we translate it? Do we just ignore it? In fact, it's there for a reason. It means, 'Look!' Perhaps today we would say, 'Listen!'

He went up out of the water and, look, heaven was opened ... and, look, a voice from heaven. It's saying in effect, Don't nod off. Pay attention. Are you listening? Do you see it? Do you get it? Heaven was opened! A voice spoke from heaven!

What happened when heaven was opened? He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him. Where else is the Spirit of God likened to a dove? He's like a refining fire, he's like a rushing wind, he's like a raging torrent. When he comes to sinful men and women he comes to purify, to shake up, to cleanse. But when the Spirit of God came down on Jesus he came down like a dove. There was no impurity to refine. There was no debris to blow out. There was no dirt to wash away.

And what happened when the voice spoke from heaven? It said, 'This is my Son. I love him. I think he's fantastic!' Perhaps the most amazing thing about the cross is that the one who died there didn't just represent the Son of God. He was the Son of God. The wonder of the cross is not just what Jesus did but who Jesus was.

There's one final lesson in the baptism of Jesus. When he went down into the water it was a symbol of death, but we read that as soon as Jesus was baptised he came up out of the water, foreshadowing his resurrection. Death could not hold him. He rose again to bring forgiveness and peace with God, to baptise us with the Holy Spirit and fire, to bring us into the family of God, the light of his love and the warmth of his embrace.