

We are into the second week of 2017 and we look forward to this year with all its joys and challenges. We meditate on the theme, "At his baptism Jesus is revealed as the Son of God." How does the baptism of Jesus reveal that he is indeed the Son of God? Baptism is basically an immersion in water symbolic of cleansing and purification. Water being used for ritual cleansing is quite common for people in India as much as in West Asia. In our own country people go to the sacred rivers like Ganga to take a dip in it so that they feel that they have been cleansed of their sins. Similarly, the Jews also have Mikvah's for their ritual cleansing. A Mikvah is a bath used for the purpose of ritual immersion in Judaism symbolic of cleansing. So, when John came baptising for repentance, people had long since grown used to the idea of baptism being associated with cleansing. This morning we will look at the preparation that went into the Baptism of Jesus, the purpose of his baptism and the good news made available to all because of the baptism.

In preparation for the baptism of Jesus, John the Baptist comes as a forerunner for the coming of Jesus. He tells the people that he baptises the people with water but the one who will come after him will baptise them with the Holy Spirit and fire. Those who receive Christ will be purified by fire and strengthened by the Holy Spirit.

He was also a messenger with the message, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand." The point that John was making was that even the Jews needed to repent and be baptised. They had only heard of Gentiles being baptised but now John was asking the descendants of Abraham to do likewise. John calls for a change of lifestyle - to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Why did Jesus have to be baptised? First of all, it was a public proclamation of what he had come to do – to fulfil the plan and purpose of God. Secondly, it was his identification with sinners. Though he was without sin he identified with sinful human beings (2 Corinthians 5:21). God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Thirdly, it was a revelation of Jesus as the Son of God. People had different opinions about Jesus Christ because some said that he was a prophet, others said that he was Elijah, still others said he was a good man and some thought he was a rabble rouser. However, God's revelation was, "This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased." Fourthly, it was a confirmation of who Jesus was as we see the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit all involved in the baptism and affirming clearly who Jesus was. Finally, it was necessary in order to fulfil all righteousness. God's righteous requirements of the law were fully met in Christ. It was right for Jesus to be baptised by John because it was according to God's plan.

Because of the baptism of Jesus the good news begins to be proclaimed to all people. In the reading from the book of Acts we see Peter preaching the Gospel to Cornelius and his household. Peter recognises that God accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

Peter then talks about the three key events in narrating the Gospel. Firstly, he talks about the life of Jesus, that he was anointed by the Holy Spirit and he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, or tyrannized by him, so that his power was seen to be greater than the devil's because God was with him. Secondly, Peter reminds them that the Jewish leaders had killed him by crucifixion. However, Peter shows that behind the human execution a divine plan was being fulfilled. Peter talks about killing Jesus by hanging him on a tree. Peter calls the cross a tree to indicate that Jesus was bearing in our place the curse or judgement of God on our sins. Finally, Peter talks about the resurrection from the dead on the third day. Jesus defeated Satan sin and death on the cross and is seated at the right hand of the Father with power and authority.

The baptism of Jesus challenges us to repent of our sinful ways and to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. The need for Jesus to be baptised was because it was a public proclamation of the beginning of his ministry, his identification with sinners, revelation to others that he was indeed the Messiah and to fulfil all the righteous requirements of the Law. The baptism of Jesus leads onto his ministry, his death, his resurrection and now we await his second coming. In rising again Jesus has shown us that Satan, sin and death have been defeated and he makes available to us the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life. May we take courage that Christ knows all our struggles, our weaknesses, our sufferings and anxieties, as he himself has gone through the way of the cross and has identified with us as a human being.