

Baptism of Jesus - 9th Jan 2022.

A priest buys a lawn mower at a yard sale. Back home, he pulls on the starter rope a few times with no results. He storms back to the yard sale and tells the previous owner, "I can't get the mower to start!" "That's because you have to curse to get it started," says the man. "I'm a man of the cloth. I don't even remember how to curse." "You keep pulling on that rope, vicar, and it'll come back to you."

Now that I have your attention, I'll tell you about today's theme - but my cunning plan is so cunning that it is an example of what the baptism of Jesus actually was - to grab peoples' attention - just like my joke.

Let's face it, if you're actually the Son of God and can do amazing stuff, why go through the motions with your first lieutenant - that is, get baptized by John - as if you were an ordinary bloke?

There are a number of reasons why. To start with, Jesus needed some validation with John - to be associated with John's ministry, because John's ministry was pointing to Jesus. This is made particularly clear in disciple John's gospel: 'The next day John (the baptist) saw Jesus coming towards him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins 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 baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.'

Luke's gospel is very thin on Jesus' baptism, and Mark is even more so, so our accounts depend for detail upon Matthew's and John's gospels.

Clearly, something occurred that opened John's eyes to the person of Jesus, as he says, 'I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptise with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptise with the

Holy Spirit. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.'

Whether a dove came down and sat on Jesus' head, we don't know - and it ultimately doesn't matter; but something happened that made it clear to John that this person he was baptizing was the one who had been foretold - the Messiah.

In Matthew's gospel, John tries to duck it - to avoid baptizing Jesus; 'But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'

Which brings us to the second reason for Jesus to be baptized, as he responds to John's

comment by saying, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.'

Now there's a word I find sticks in my craw - 'righteousness' - it smacks of holier-than-thou and snooty hypocritical piety to me; but if we take that imagery from our minds and do a little thesaurus hunting, we find more acceptable animals.

(You should always be careful when thesaurus hunting, as you never know what you may come across - some of the thesauri can be quite intimidating!)

But on this occasion I found a couple of quite friendly animals, which told me more clearly

what I was after. 'Decency', 'integrity', and 'irreproachability'; what Jesus meant here - in my view - was that if we do this thing (that is, you baptise me, John), then no-one can argue that I have in any way set myself up as better than the next man.

Confusing? - a little - because of course we now know that Jesus was way beyond 'better' than the next man - but what he was doing was identifying himself, or associating himself with human sinfulness by his apparent need for John's baptism of repentance; already becoming the figurative substitute for our wrongs, hence disciple John's words, 'Look, the

Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!

In this way we see that the 'righteousness' is to do with Jesus consecrating himself to God, and the Father publicly acknowledges him in the form of a dove and a voice, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'

I accept that these latter items - the dove and the voice - may have been later authorship glosses, but they don't alter the fact that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan at the start of his ministry.

That is also a marker - so perhaps another reason why Jesus wanted to be publicly

baptized - as a point in time when he started his saving work on earth.

Again, it can be seen as the prelude to the fugue of being driven out into the desert to be tempted by the devil - the first of what must have been many occasions when he could have shown his power and had all the adulation and praise he wanted, if he had given in.

Before we moved to Agassiz, I used to do aikido - a Japanese martial art, aimed at gently persuading those so inclined that it really wasn't a good idea to attack you. I had a wonderful teacher (sensei) who would, at the end of each session, get down on his hands and

knees with some of us lesser mortals, and clean the floor.

In some dojos that would never happen, and there was another teacher in my dojo for whom such an activity was way beneath her; furthermore, she would expect one of the lower ranks to fold up her 'gi' - as our clothing was called - and present it to her on completion of training for the day.

Sheila and I saw an episode of 'Silent Witness' recently, where a headmaster, faced with a blocked irrigation ditch, clambers in and gets wet and dirty to unblock it himself. He was leading by example - as my senior sensei was at

the dojo; not expecting a minion to do his dirty work for him.

In the same way, Jesus is setting an example for his followers by being baptized. He is saying, 'I'm just a man like you.'

OK, we know that he wasn't like us in many ways, but what is scary about Jesus is not his divinity, but his humanity - how alike he was. He didn't appear in dazzling white robes or with a halo around his head; nor is it likely that he had piercingly blue eyes - which is the way some film-makers like to portray Jesus.

There was nothing physically distinguishing about Jesus - he would have looked as ordinary

as you and me; now that's scary. Is it really any wonder that folk thought he was off his trolley? Even his family did at times.

One of the disservices that artists through the ages have done, is to portray Jesus as some sort of ethereal figure, who is quite obviously different from all other human beings in their paintings. One can understand why, but until Jesus came to be recognized as the strange travelling preacher that he was, you wouldn't have been able to pick him out in a crowd.

Sheila and I have also recently been watching 'The Chosen', and one of the good things about

it is the sheer 'ordinariness' of Jesus, and the incredibly gentle way he interacts with people whose lives he changes; there are no throngs of angels singing in heaven, there are no thunderbolts of lightning (so far), there are no strange faces made by Jesus when he heals or performs some other miracle; just a man who silently prays.

Our Christmas time was a time for us to remember the birth of Jesus as a moment of recognition of a special baby; Jesus' baptism as an adult is a time for us to remember that he had to be recognized all over again in a very different way, and in a way that set him on a

journey that was beyond tough - but one we shall follow it with him, every step of the way.

Now go and start your lawn mower - whatever you say to it!