

# Initiation

a sermon preached on the Feast of the

## Baptism of Christ

13 January 2008

at

**St Luke's in the City, Christchurch**

by **Fr David Moore**

parish priest

Lections: Isaiah 42:1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

John the Baptist offered Jesus the opportunity to take the place of superiority, to accept the prominent role in a religious movement instead of having his own genuine experience. <sup>1</sup> This is Jesus' first temptation, foreshadowing the wilderness temptations which follow. <sup>2</sup> Jesus refused to take the position of superiority offered to him, insisting, somewhat enigmatically, that it is "proper for us to fulfil all righteousness",<sup>3</sup> submitting instead to the authority of John the Baptist and his baptism. Jesus refused to accept a role, which would surely have attracted immediate attention and accolade, choosing instead the experience of being plunged, along with everyone else, into the waters.

The baptism of Christ, and by extension the baptism of all, is frequently reduced to moral terms or political terms. Baptism as washing, cleansing from sin – the moral reduction. Baptism as alignment with God, against any and every other kind of authority – the political reduction. While the moral and political aspects of baptism are essential to the ministry which will unfold, both are however the natural consequence of Jesus' decision to refuse the place of superiority which was offered to him, and to opt instead for the experience of going down into the waters. That is to say, Jesus' moral and political authority depend on his willingness to resist the temptation to take the place of superiority which is offered to him, and to put his trust instead in the experience of being plunged into his the depths.

Descent, into the waters, into the depths, into the murky and muddy depths – that is the path to true Son-ship for Jesus. Only in the murky and muddy depths can he face the chief problem of his life, which lies not in some political system or evil ruler – though these are historical empirical realities - but in the depths of his own soul. The fundamental problem is the *possible misuse of the power of Son-ship*. As God's Son, the beloved,<sup>4</sup> Jesus is possessed with tremendous power. If all power, even the relatively minor power which all of us possess, is capable of being misused, how much more so the unfathomable, immeasurable power of the Son of God, Emmanuel, the Christ. What is the solution to this age-old problem? ✦

In a word, initiation. This is the primary meaning of Jesus' baptism, and thus the primary meaning of the baptism of all. Initiation is the way of descent. It is a return to the womb from which the Creator called all matter into being in the first place – the Spirit having hovered over the waters of the chaotic abyss.<sup>5</sup> It took John to flesh out what Matthew, Mark and Luke were only able to hint at: "I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."<sup>6</sup> The womb of creation, the chaotic abyss, water and Spirit – these are equivalent terms, interchangeable symbols, gesturing towards that one universal reality which is the primeval state of existence. Just as the universe itself – every single person, creature, cell, molecule, atom, and even sub-atomic particle – owes its existence to the primeval stuff of the cosmos, the infinitesimally-dense abyss of primal matter-and-energy. Initiation is the return to this primeval matter-and-energy, this abyss, this womb, in order to be made

---

<sup>1</sup> Matthew 3:13

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 4:1ff

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 3:15

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 3:17

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 1:2

<sup>6</sup> John 3:5

anew, to be born again, by water and Spirit. Christian initiation is baptism into this abyss, which our tradition codifies under the dense symbolic expression ‘participation in the death and resurrection of Christ’.

Jesus could have accepted the leadership of John the Baptist’s movement, no doubt fulfilling many hopes and expectations for a triumphal revolutionary Judaism, a conquistador Messiah. Instead, Jesus chose the path of initiation in the muddy abyss of his own depths, his own temptation to power, his greatest potential sin. The question of whether or not Jesus sinned is a matter to which I prefer to give a wide berth, since the insistence on Jesus’ sinlessness creates as many problems with respect to the nature of humanity as it solves, and the attempts to explain them leave much to be desired. What we do know from Jesus himself is that sin does not consist merely in the act of adultery or the act of murder, for example, but in the thoughts of the heart.<sup>7</sup> Whatever name we give it, it’s reasonable to assume that Jesus ‘confessed’ to John, and repented of, the possible misuse of his power.

Repentance and initiation are close cousins experientially. And as a consequence of refusing the position of superiority and a role of organisational prominence, choosing instead the humiliation of experience of the abyss of his own soul, Jesus emerges from the water breathing anew. He takes the first breath of his new existence, his initiated self. He takes the breath of a person who now knows himself, and who has therefore come to a new level of consciousness. He takes the first breath of a person reborn, by water and Spirit, through chaos and Divine breath. As a new person, reborn, he will be able to contend with the demons in the wilderness, into which he is immediately led, and ultimately the demons of the religious and political establishment.

What does all this mean for us? Because christian faith has nothing to do with historical commemoration, and because christian faith does not consist in totemic adulation for the God-man who lived 2000 years ago, Jesus’ way must be our way – that is the meaning of the word ‘discipleship’ and the true content of the command ‘take up your cross’.<sup>8</sup> We, too, are called to repent of the temptation that is the major problem of our lives – whatever the particular contours that might take for each of us – to resist the temptation to some position or role. For that is merely a counterfeit for true experience, a pale substitute for real living. We, too, are called to choose instead the experience of descent into our own murky, muddy and chaotic depths – from which we emerge as new creations, breathing as for the first time, initiated as sons and daughters of the God who looks upon us as beloved. Initiation, because it is *experienced* – in stark contrast to all grasping at the false power of role – leads naturally, organically, to moral and political consequences. And because initiation leads to organic moral and political acts they are both appropriate to our individual calling, as well as life-giving for the whole community.

We gaze into the waters of the Font on this feast day – and every time we enter into this sacred place, touching the waters of our baptism – because they are the symbol for the initiatory experience of the abyss into which each of must descend, in order to emerge as the new creation, as God’s beloved daughters and sons. Just as we gaze into the Cup week-by-week, because it is the symbol for the initiation – which we need to choose again and again throughout our lives - into that fuller humanity which is the true meaning of new birth in Christ’s Blood.

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)

---

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:21-48

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 16:24ff