

Sermon – Mathew 3: 13-17

Isaiah 42:1-9

Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Well, I'm not sure how you feel, but for me it's been a rather bumpy start to the year. Like many of you, I have felt quite helpless as we watch the trauma from the bushfires, as they wreak havoc across our country. The magnitude of the situation has been further highlighted here in Melbourne with days of smoke creating a grimy pall across our city. We have been captive to our weather patterns as cycles of cool followed by hot, alternatively give respite and then fan the flames. Added to all of this has been the barrage of media reporting on the fires, our leaders and our own responses to the fires, and of course the causes of the fires, the scale of which are unprecedented, certainly in living memory.

It's not the happy, hopeful beginning to the year that we normally experience. And as I pondered on our Gospel reading today, Matthew's version of the baptism of Jesus, I wondered what is normal? There was certainly nothing normal about Jesus' baptism. In all the Gospels, it marks the entrance of the adult Jesus, and the beginning of his ministry. It is a pivotal moment. So as we explore this Gospel reading and its relationship to the reading from Isaiah, I want to end up asking have we too reached a pivotal moment? Is it time for us to ask ourselves what sort of relationship do we have with God and with creation?

Well as Fr Craig and I have both mentioned in recent sermons, Matthew uses the Old Testament extensively in his Gospel. The first 4 verses of today's reading from Isaiah are found in chapter 12 later in the Gospel, with Matthew directly linking Jesus to the Servant described by Isaiah. And even in the 5 verses of today's Gospel there are hints, echoes of Isaiah. As Jesus approaches John for baptism, John demurs, saying he is the one needing baptism by Jesus. But Jesus responds by saying: "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness."

What does Jesus mean in this term righteousness? We only have to look at our reading in Isaiah to get a feeling for the meaning. In verse six, the prophet proclaims:

I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.

Righteousness means to be in relationship and in the context of Isaiah, it is the relationship between God and his Servant who is taken by the hand and kept. And furthermore, God then gives the Servant as a covenant to the people, to be in relationship with the people, to be a light to the nations. Is Jesus this Servant? Well clearly Matthew thinks so as he imports the first 4 verses of this reading into Chapter 8 of his Gospel.

So Jesus is baptized by John, aligning himself with the repenting remnant of Israel and submitting himself to the will of God. And when he is baptized “he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” Here there are more echoes of Isaiah from verse 1.

Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.

There is nothing normal about this baptism. It launches Jesus on his Messianic mission. It defines him as Son of God, as the Spirit filled Servant described in terms of Old Testament expectation whose mission is to bring justice to his people. It is the beginning of a renewal so profound as to amount to a new creation. Jesus’ ministry will reclaim lives for a new humanity to be lived out as a renewed people of God. With Jesus comes a new covenant for all people regardless of race, religion, sex or status. The baptism of Jesus indeed marks a pivotal point.

So what does baptism mean to us? Last week I baptized a little girl after our Sunday service and as part of the opening prayer I said:

Baptism is the gift of our Lord Jesus Christ. It marks the beginning of a journey with God which continues for the rest of our lives.

During baptism, we, or our Godparents on our behalf, make promises to turn to Christ and reject selfish living. By the passing through of the waters of baptism, where we die to sin and are raised to new life, we are united to Christ's own dying and rising. Baptism is about being in a profound relationship with God, and God's creation, including each other. As Jesus said "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all you soul, and with all you mind. And you shall love your neighbour as yourself."

I wonder what Jesus would make of our world today? A world in which leaders are more focused on power and making money than creating a sustainable future where the resources of the world are shared. A world in which there are increasing episodes of extreme weather events, which in turn, have created the fire disaster sitting at our own doorstep. I'm wondering if these fires will be a wake-up call, a pivotal moment, to both the powerful groups within our own country and to us, the everyday Australians, to take another look at how we live and care for God's creation. Are we ready to live out our baptismal promises? I wonder how we are called to live out our baptismal promises in harmony with our environment? Are we ready to be in union with Jesus Christ and hear that assurance from God "This is my Son or Daughter, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased?"