

Jesus' Baptism

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[0 : 0 0] over the last few weeks here we've been preaching through the early chapters of Matthew's gospel announcing the birth of Jesus and now coming to his baptism i guess even though this church is relatively full this morning baptisms are not really big news they don't get reported in the newspapers usually certainly not on television and we don't really get big crowds for baptisms but it was a bit different in Jesus day and in John's day two thousand years ago the baptisms that John was doing were big news and crowds came from everywhere yes perhaps they were intrigued by this man a very odd appearance a bit like we saw on the video man with long hair wearing camel skin a leather belt around his waist he ate locusts which don't seem to me to be a delicacy over here but still apparently in the middle east people eat locusts a poor man probably by his appearance slightly unusual he was in the desert which is hardly a place to attract a crowd if you imagine that John wanted to attract a crowd through what he said well you'd imagine that he'd be in Burke Street in Jerusalem but no he was out in the desert out in the sticks out in the sort of northwest part of Victoria sort of equivalent way from civilization and yet there he drew great crowds he was probably in the area between

Jerusalem and the Jordan River fairly steep drop and a fairly much a wilderness area in fact it's very barren these days and hardly any vegetation there at all that's the sort of area that John was at this man called John the Baptist but nonetheless the crowds came and they came for his preaching they didn't come to get baptized they came to hear him preach so the chapter begins in those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming preaching that's what he was about that's what his task was it's a little bit of a misnomer to call him John the Baptist because really his fundamental job was to preach it would be better to say this is John the preacher that people have come to hear the baptisms were secondary they were how he dealt with those who responded to his preaching but basically people came to hear him preach that's what he was on about and that's why the crowds were there and then when people responded in the appropriate way he baptized them in the Jordan River again as we saw on the video not with a little font like we have in a church but rather out in the outside world in the river Jordan the major river that flows down the eastern boundary of the nation of Israel or Palestine what John did was highly unusual there was nobody else going around preaching and baptizing people in fact hardly anyone was baptized in that country at all the Jews might have ritual baths called mikveh baths where there were big troughs built out of stone they would walk down seven steps usually and submerge themselves but that was something they did some Jews did fairly frequently if you go to the temple of Jerusalem there are a couple of mikveh baths there for Jews to walk into to walk under the water to be ceremonially pure and clean before they went into the temple precincts and offered sacrifices but that was a bit different that's sort of like a ceremonial washing it's a bit like coming to church each week and having a big bath out there in the courtyard and all of us walking through it before we come into church now not every Jew was involved in that sort of ritual but that's the closest they came to a sort of baptism baptisms did exist for people who were not Jews called Gentiles anybody who was not a Jew racially was a Gentile most of us I guess will be Gentiles some will have Jewish descent but most of us will be technically Gentiles not of Jewish descent and if a Gentile wanted to become a Jew the first step was to be baptized and again they would go probably to a river more likely than a sort of big bath and they would themselves walk into the river and put themselves under the water and then come out if they were a male they would then go and be circumcised and then if they were head of the family they might then go and offer a sacrifice at the temple but for anyone and any group of people who wanted to become a Jew not already being Jews that's what they would do as a first step they would baptize themselves really in the water and usually in the Jordan but not always what John the Baptist did was highly unusual he baptized other people they didn't baptize themselves but he like we saw on the video would probably push them under the water baptizing other people highly unusual it was not a ceremonial washing

John the Baptist wasn't preparing people to go and offer sacrifices at a temple but rather what he was doing was something more profound and significant and he was baptizing Jews not Gentiles he wasn't dealing with people who wanted to become Jews he was dealing with people who already were descendants of Abraham Jews by race and descent and he was baptizing them now why should a Jew need baptism?

it was almost an insult to suggest they would because for many Jews they thought that they were right with God they were descended from Abraham who'd lived 2,000 years before John and before Jesus and if you were descended from Abraham then you were a Jew and for many of them they thought well that's enough that's good enough to be right with God if I'm descended from Abraham then God accepts me I'm part of his chosen people and the chosen race of Jews indeed Jesus seems to be countering that when he says to these Pharisees and the leaders of the Jews do not presume to say to yourselves we have Abraham as our ancestor for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham the Jews you see would say we have Abraham as our ancestor that makes us right with God we don't need anything else if we're descended from Abraham and Jesus says John rather says rubbish

God can raise up children for Abraham from these stones being a child of Abraham is nothing that's not significant there is something more significant that John was preaching about so he's telling off the Jews for relying on outward forms of religion for belonging to the Jewish race because of their ancestry he's telling them off for all the false security that they relied upon and pointing them to the thing that was essential he's saying to them don't rely on your race don't think that because you're a Jew you're right with God rubbish don't rely on your parents either just because your parents might have been faithful Jews doesn't mean you are don't rely on them don't rely on the outward religion don't rely on being a member of the Jewish synagogue or anything like that don't rely upon external forms of religion there is something more important than that and John certainly gets stuck into them doesn't he we might think that the people of God who are very holy would be very polite well he obviously wasn't an Englishman what does he say to the Pharisees and Sadducees the leaders of the Jews he says you brood of vipers it's hardly the way to win people's favour is it you can imagine they'd be rather incensed he's telling them off for their hypocrisy because they have an outward show of religion they boast about their religiosity their piety they do things in public very devoutly yes they go to all the services yes but he says you're hypocrites in effect because you fail to get what's right on the inside probably they'd not come to be baptised but rather come to watch to see what was going on maybe in the end to mock we don't know you see baptism which is what John did for those who responded to his preaching is just an outward sign it's just an outward ceremony a little bit of ritual really many people think it's a bit of a superstition a lucky charm but it means nothing nothing if it's not accompanied by something on the inside you see what John was preaching about what Jesus goes on to preach about later what the Bible teaches us about is that it's not the external form that counts it's not a bit of water being splashed over you or being dunked in water that counts it's not just external forms of what we do that matter but it's really about what's on the inside of us in our hearts that's what counts and John here is telling off the Jews for their false security for relying on their religious practices their racial ancestry and so on the key to John the Baptist is the word repentance when it says in verse 1 that John was there preaching the first word that's mentioned repent when Jesus comes later and preaches the first word that he says is repent when many of the Old Testament prophets appeared the first word of Zechariah for example was repent when Jesus sends his disciples to go out and teach other people he tells them to tell others to repent fairly uncomfortable word maybe something that we think is a little bit harsh but it actually runs from the beginning to the end of the Bible and it's the key to John's preaching that's what he was on about repent what does it mean to repent we probably think of oh well I say sorry to God for the things I've done wrong it's certainly part of it but it's really just a a poor first step little children will often say sorry to their parents they probably don't really mean it well they may mean I'm sorry but they just go and do the same thing again and again and many of us with God are a bit like that as well we might say to God

[10:37] I'm sorry God but we just go and do the same thing again and again repentance is more than saying sorry in part it means changing your mind and the word in Greek means to change the mind to change your mind from thinking that way to thinking that way and yet again in the end that's insufficient for what repentance is about because the idea of repentance is about a radical change of direction of life instead of heading that way to head that way that's what repentance is about when we say I repent of my sins as parents and godparents are going to do later then I'm making some little claim here you're making a very fundamental and radical statement you're saying I repent I'm turning from heading my life in that direction to that direction and that direction is the direction of God I'm repenting I'm changing I'm turning away from living my life without God and for myself or for other things and I'm turning to head my life for God and that's a radical statement to make a fundamental change of life to make and that's what John was urging people to do a year or two ago when I was living in England there was the story of an elderly man who'd been driving down the M40 which runs between

London and Oxford it was at night and he was driving on the wrong side of the road now the M40 is a little bit busier and more hair raising than the Doncaster Freeway it's a big motorway and there's lots of traffic even at night how on earth he drove 15 to 20 miles on the wrong side of a motorway even at night beats me because he would have found things coming the other way but this man didn't know what he'd missed was the sign when you turn onto the motorway that says wrong way go back it's pretty blunt isn't it but that's John's message really here that's what repentance is about to call people to repent as John does as Jesus does as the Old Testament prophets do as the disciples and followers of Jesus do is to say you're living your life the wrong way go back to God pretty blunt but it's there from the beginning to the end of the Bible and when we say

I repent of my sins in a baptism service we say God I've gone the wrong way and I'm turning back to you it's not just a little ceremony on a Sunday morning you see it's about the whole of our lives every day our life needs basic changing repent turn around go back to God it's the essential starting point for Christian faith it's not about being good not about doing the right thing not fundamentally about loving neighbours and so on the starting point for being a Christian is repentance turning around turning to God and recognising that life has been lived the wrong way up till now and certainly not many people like hearing that message not many people like being told that their life's been lived the wrong way whether they've lived it for one year or 90 in one years not many people like being told your life's heading the wrong direction go that way instead we can get away with signs like that on a freeway but telling people that for their lives seems a little bit harsh you see most of us think that our lives are going in roughly the right direction basically good people don't want to harm anyone not so sure about doing good for them but I certainly won't try and harm them but you see what's the essential thing is God

God is the first priority and for most of our world he's not even part of the lives let alone a first priority for most of us what comes first in our life is ourselves me most of us live lives that are basically selfish we do things for other people so long as it gives us some pleasure or gratitude or good feelings maybe if we're very good we'll have lives that live for our family but part of that's for our own ego or security or pleasure or company as well for many of us our lives are motivated by our jobs by money by security needing to build up enough possessions so that when we retire we can do so with luxury without a care in the world maybe good living but it's not Christian living Christian living is where God is first not me not my family not my kids my grandkids not my house not my job not my possessions not my holidays all of those are good things and we can live with them but it's what's first that counts and if God's not first then we need to turn back because we're going the wrong way repent and you see repentance is not a bad word really in one sense it seems harsh to say to someone repent but it's actually a good word because it means that God is giving us another chance if God's people say to others repent the implication is that God's giving us a chance to start again he's allowing us time to turn back he's going to forgive us for our failures and for our wrong direction of life we're starting all over again with God it's a very good thing a positive thing to say to someone repent turn back you're living your life the wrong way because it's saying by implication that God will forgive you and you can start again with God you see it's a radical step to make being a Christian is actually quite radical it's not about just being a good citizen it's about putting God first and therefore it's about making time for God first time to give to God in our time in our worship making time

Sunday by Sunday to worship God in the fellowship of God's people it's about making time to read the Bible to study it to understand it to understand what God's like it's about making time to pray to pray to God not only telling God what we need and what we want but taking time to pray to God and thank God for who he is for his love for us his mercy for us his forgiveness and for sending Jesus Christ for us it's about making time to be with God's people to encourage others in Christian living and to make sure that we grow as Christians and obey God and do what he wants in our life to love him with all our heart soul mind and strength and love our neighbor as ourself and not just the second without the first you see John said to these Pharisees to the Jews to the leaders he said you brood of vipers you're hypocrites really and then he said in verse 8 bear fruit worthy of repentance that's what Christian living is to do to live lives that are worthy of repentance that have turned around and put God first a baptism service is a very serious event because parents and godparents are saying exactly what I've been saying that we have lived our lives the wrong way we haven't given time to God and he hasn't been first in our lives and now we are changing now we are saying yes God you will be number one we turn to you we turn away from the way we've lived we want to live lives that are worthy of God and so we're changing our priorities no longer will I or my family or my job or my money or my possessions or my fun or pleasure or holidays come first but God will and so God will have time in my life in the things I do in my worship of God in my part of the fellowship of God's people in the church now they're fairly bold promises that parents and godparents make at baptism and those of us who are Christians who've grown up and been confirmed or been baptized as adults have made for ourselves as well and maybe for some of us who have been baptized or confirmed need to rethink again the priorities of our life and turn back again to God there's an urgency about John the Baptist's message because he knew that Jesus was coming and he didn't think of Jesus as being meek and mild a little baby in a manger who doesn't do anyone any harm but rather he anticipated that Jesus when he came would judge the world he said his winnowing fork is in his hand he will separate the chaff from the grain that is all the harvest would be put in a great pile and they'd have this little fork and they'd pick it up and they'd lift it up into the wind and all the rubbish the refuse of the grain would be blown away all the skin bits and the bits that are no good the wind would just drifted away but the good grain the solid grain would fall back into the pile if you keep doing that all the time the little bits the dusty bits get blown away and the good remains and that's what Jesus is coming to do

[20 : 05] John is saying he's coming to separate the chaff from the grain the grain will be preserved by God by Jesus but the chaff will be blown away what's the distinction between the two it's not Jews and non-Jews it's not good and not good but it's those who have repented of their sins and those who haven't those who've turned to God with their lives and those who haven't that's the distinction that's made between the two it's not just empty words anybody can get up and say I repent but it's the lives that count live lives that are worthy of repentance live lives that bear the fruit of repentance that's the warning of this passage for each and every one of us what are you talking of?

Bana .