



# Sermon by Rev Ross Pearce Highfield Road Uniting Church January 10, 2016

## Luke 3: 15-22

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One of the main differences, or disputes, between Christian denominations is the question of baptism. We talk about infant or adult baptism; the issue is much stronger when you use terms such as believer baptism. While our tradition talks of baptism as a sacrament and a sign of God's grace, for the Baptists and the Evangelicals, baptism is a decision and a ritual that symbolises a change of life. Both points of view have their issues, arguments and questions around what it is that we understand that we are doing in baptism. And indeed, what we understand that God is doing in baptism.

Infant baptism can be seen as a sign of God's gracious acceptance of those who do not even know about God, based in the faith of parents who do know and who want their child to be a part of the church. It is hard to talk about grace in adult baptism if your understanding of baptism is that it is a ritual demanded by God in order for you to be acceptable. On the other hand adult baptism can be seen as a symbol of a person's willingness to submit their life to God through faith in the resurrection. It is hard to talk about the new life that comes through dying and rising in a ritual where water is only splashed over the head of an infant who hasn't had a life yet. I am cheered to know that God is bigger, grander and more gracious than our little arguments about sacraments and rituals.

As much as we like to think that these are issues about denominations and theology, the questions around baptism are there in scripture. The early church was trying to work out what baptism meant and what it was all about. Baptism is questioned all through the book of Acts; what is the difference between John's baptism and Christian baptism? What does it mean to receive the Spirit at baptism? The story that Jesus was baptised only made those questions harder. If baptism is about forgiveness of sin, why does the Son of God, the man without sin, need to be baptised? Why does the One who baptised the apostles with the Spirit need to be baptised in water? You can see these questions in the four different Gospel accounts of Jesus baptism. Mark avoids the question by turning the baptism into the anointing of the Son of God. Matthew puts the question into the mouth of John and has Jesus give a strange answer. John puts it in the past tense, with Jesus only becoming known after the baptism. For Luke, the encounter becomes more about what is different between Jesus and John; not so much "why does Jesus need to be baptised" as "what does Jesus baptism signify?" The baptism is one more example in Luke's

introduction of taking the revelation of God known in Israel, and moving it on to the new revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

John's picture of God, and the will of God, was all sin and punishment. John is the original fire and brimstone preacher, picturing God as the great reaper of souls ready to gather the worthy and burn the rest. While we can see positives in calling people to account for their sins and errors, it is a very harsh message that John preached and it's a bit hard to call it gospel. Then Luke, as if to put a clear break between John and Jesus, goes on to talk about Herod arresting John. The baptism itself is almost a footnote – "and when Jesus had also been baptised and was praying". The affirming voice from heaven seems to be as much about Jesus praying as his being baptised.

In the next chapter Jesus starts preaching and for a text, takes Isaiah 49 – "the Spirit has anointed me to preach good news to the poor and release to the captives". The gospel is not about fire and brimstone, it's about release and recovery. Jesus may have been baptised by John to connect himself to the great traditions of scripture and to show his willingness to follow the will of God, but he did not take up John's ministry or John's message. The Spirit that descended on Jesus led him to a ministry of seek and save, not condemn and punish.

Maybe a way forward for us is to set aside the question of age, or ability to know what baptism is all about, and take up the symbolism that Luke brings us. Baptism is a symbol of our intention to bring people into the community and relationship with God through Jesus, rather than a ritual to demonstrate that people are acceptable to God. Let us join Jesus in his ministry of releasing people from captivity and welcoming them into the community of God.