

Mt. 3:13-17
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There are not too many incidents in the gospels that appear in all four gospels. For example, Christmas, which to most people is important is only in two. Only Matthew and Luke have the story of Jesus' birth. Jesus death and resurrection are in all four gospels. But for the events of his public ministry, well there are not many of them that make it into all four gospels. But his baptism by John the Baptist is one of those events. So it must be important. Actually it's a kind of marker. This is the start of Jesus' public ministry. But for all its importance, we don't talk about it super often, and it's somewhat tricky to understand what is going on. Well let's dive into it.

John the Baptist is out in the wilderness on the banks of the Jordan River. He is preaching repentance to the crowds who came to him. And he's baptising those who wish to be baptised as a sign of repentance. So if you were a soldier and you'd been exploiting civilians because you could, taking their money at the point of a sword, then John told you to be content with your pay. If you were a tax collector, John told you not to collect more than you were required to. And then as a sign that you were turning over a new leaf, John would baptise you in the Jordan River and send you on your way. Go and live a new life.

And then Jesus turns up to be baptised.
What is John going to say to him?
I mean there isn't anything that Jesus needs to repent of.
He doesn't need to turn over a new leaf.
It doesn't make sense for John to say,
"Go and turn over a new leaf and live exactly the way you did before."
That would be nonsense.
So John the Baptist is in a bit of a quandary.
He says to Jesus,
3:14 "I need to be baptised by you,
and do you come to me?"
It's like the local tennis coach here on the Peninsula.
He can give some good tips to the young juniors
who are just learning the game.
But what if Ash Barty swings past and asks for some coaching?
Hold on a minute.
I need to learn a few tips from you!
John the Baptist knows that he's not a flagrant sinner
like the soldiers and tax collectors that he was baptising.
But he's a sinful human being like any of us.
Being God's prophet doesn't make you perfect,
and John is under no illusions about himself.
Jesus, I need to be baptised to you.
John knows that Jesus someone whose sandals he is not worthy to carry.

We can completely understand John the Baptist's point of view.
And yet, Jesus has come a long way to be baptised.
It's maybe 100km from Nazareth to where John was baptising.
That's a long walk.
Jesus didn't go there on a whim.
He wanted to be baptised for a reason.
And John knew that Jesus was someone
who he needed to listen to and take instruction from.
It seemed strange to him that Jesus wanted to be baptised by him.
But he knew that he needed to listen to what Jesus had to say.

And so do we.

3:15 "Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now;
it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.'"

You might have expected Jesus to say,
"Yes it is right that I baptise you.

It's great that you've been exhorting the people to repent.
But I'm taking over the role bringing God's message now,
so I'll baptise you

as a way of passing the mantle,
and a sign that God's messiah is here."

But it's nothing like that.

"It is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness."

This is a hard sentence to understand.

For starters there's the phrase 'fulfil all righteousness'.

This has actually come from the Bible into common English
as a metaphor.

We use it to mean dot your i's and cross your t's.

As in, "It would be great to have you help out at Trinity Kids,
but we need to get your WWC check, police check
and a couple of rounds of child safe training into you
to fulfil all righteousness."

We have to be scrupulous about dotting our i's and crossing our t's.
Problem is that the way the phrase has come across into English
is not what Jesus meant.

Jesus is not dotting his i's and crossing his t's by getting baptised.

It's not like all good Christians need to get baptised,
so I guess I better get baptised too to dot my i's a cross by t's.
That's not what Jesus is saying.

Then there's the next alternative.

This is the way the apostle Paul uses the word righteousness.

This is also the way we use the word righteousness
when we are talking theology today.

So when Paul says righteous,
he means being made right to God's sight.

For example in Rom 3:10 he says,
'there is no one righteous not even one.'

He means there is no one who is right in God's sight.

Everyone is a sinner.

No one is righteous.

Or a bit further on in the same chapter.

Rom 3:22 "This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."

That is, through faith in Jesus, people are made right in God's sight.

That's what Paul means.

Problem is that makes no sense in Matthew chapter 3.

What would we be saying?

That Jesus was made right in the sight of his Father by getting baptised?

That would kind of imply

that he wasn't already right in the sight of his Father.

Well that's not right.

So we come to right alternative.

What does Matthew mean when he says righteousness?

Turns out he means something a little bit different to Paul.

That's OK.

Two people can use words slightly differently.

Language works like that.

So in Mt 6:1, Jesus says,

"Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them."

He's talking about giving, fasting and praying.

In this case, righteousness doesn't mean being made right in God's sight, like it does in Romans.

It wouldn't make sense.

"Be careful not to practice your being made right in God's sight in front of others to be seen by them."

It doesn't work, does it?

In this case righteousness means 'acts in accordance with God's will'.

That works.

"Be careful not to practice your acts in accordance with God's will in front of others to be seen by them."

Makes perfect sense.

Giving is something that is in accordance with God's will.

But don't do it as a show for people to see.

That's exactly what Jesus was saying.

So here at Jesus baptism.

Why does Jesus want John to baptise him?

"Let it be so now;

it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness."

Jesus is saying, it's right for us to do this

because it is the will of God the Father in this situation.

By baptising me, John,

you are carrying out God's will.

This is God's plan and we need to make it happen.

Then John consented.

John might not have quite understood why.

But Jesus is greater than he is.

Jesus says it is God's plan.

He's happy to go with that.

So that's great so far.

But it begs another question.

Why does God the Father want Jesus to get baptised?

Ok, I've got two answers to that for you.

There's the Harry Potter answer,

and the solid theology answer.

They're both right.

One's easier to understand,

the other is deeper for those with enquiring minds.

If you've read Harry Potter or watched the movies, you will have come across the sorting hat.

When the kids first turn up to school,

the sorting hat gets put on their heads,

and it examines what is in their hearts,

and it puts them in the house that's most appropriate.
Gryffindor if they are courageous.
Slytherin if they are determined and ambitious etc.
You can think about John's baptism like that.
This one goes under the water.
Yep, he needs to repent.
That one goes under the water.
Yep he needs to repent.
It's the same all day.
Every person John baptises,
there is the same divine verdict.
Yep he needs to repent.
And then Jesus is baptised.
And a voice from heaven says,
"This is my Son, whom I love;
with him I am well pleased."
Well that was different.
It's like the sorting hat is sorting them into two houses.
The ones that need to repent.
And the ones who God is already well pleased with.
Only thing is the second house has only one member at this stage.
So why does God want Jesus to get baptised?
It's a declaration of Jesus' perfection.
It's letting people know right up front,
right at the start of Jesus' ministry,
this is something different.
Jesus is not just a slightly more important prophet than John.
Jesus is qualitatively different.
He is the unique Son of God.
He is the only human who is perfect, sinless.
The only one of us who doesn't need to repent of his sins.
At Jesus' baptism, he is declared the unique Son of God.
That's the sorting hat answer.
Easy to understand and right as far as it goes.

Now for the slightly more stretching answer.
Why does God the Father want Jesus to get baptised?
Theologically, Jesus is a representative of God's people.
He does things on behalf of all of us.
It's like when David fought Goliath.
He did it as a representative of Israel.
When David defeated Goliath,
all Israel shared in the victory over the Philistines.
The prophet Isaiah looks forward to a man
who will represent the whole nation before God.
In Isaiah he's called the 'Servant'.
The servant is introduced in Isaiah in these words.
Is 42:1 "Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen one in whom I delight."
Can you hear the echo of those words in the voice from heaven?
3:17 "This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased."
And in Isaiah, the servant takes on the role
of representing the whole nation before God.
So for example Is 53:5,
"But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed."
We apply that directly to Jesus dying for us,
but in Isaiah, it is the Servant who represents the nation before God.
And here Matthew is telling us that Jesus is that servant.
That's why we can read the passage in Isaiah and apply it to Jesus.
Jesus at his baptism is declared to be the servant.
And in fact there has already been a hint in Matthew,
that Jesus would represent the nation before God.
A few weeks ago,
just before Christmas,
we read the passage in Mt 2 about the wise men.
And we heard these words.
"And so was fulfilled what the Lord has said through the prophet:

"Out of Egypt I called my son."
But in Hosea, the son is the nation.
In Matthew, it is applied to Jesus.
Jesus represents the nation before God the Father.
He is the son in Hosea.
He is the servant in Isaiah.
And at his baptism, he represents the nation.

So why does God the Father want Jesus to be baptised?
Because the nation needed to repent and turn back to God.
And as the representative of God's people,
Jesus was baptised on behalf of God's people.
He did it on our behalf.
The nation had never been able to reform its ways
and turn back to God properly.
The people John was baptising in the wilderness.
They might have a genuine desire
to reform themselves and live for God.
But at the end of the day,
they would come up out of the water and go home and keep on sinning.
And the same goes for us when we go home from church.
You will probably sin before you eat your lunch.
But Jesus would live the perfect life before God.
And as the representative of the nation,
his perfection will be credited to us.

And in fact this theme of Jesus representing the nation doesn't stop here.
Next week we will look at the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.
Now there's lots to say about that passage.
But one thing is that Jesus is representing the nation.
Under Moses' leadership, Israel went into the wilderness for 40 years.
They were tempted and they failed.
Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days.
Satan tempts him.
And Jesus succeeds where Israel failed.

And because he is the servant of Isaiah,
his success is the success of God's people.
Those who are in Christ
have come through the temptation in the wilderness unscathed.

And of course, Jesus representing the nation didn't finish there.
We know the end of the story.

Jesus represented the nation on the cross.

He didn't need to be punished for his sin.

Just like he didn't need to repent of his sins at his baptism.

But he was the representative of God's people.

He was punished for our sin.

In the words of Isaiah about the Servant who represented the nation,

"But he was pierced for our transgressions,

he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,

and by his wounds we are healed."

Now I know we have some practical people at church today.

You are sitting there thinking to yourselves,

this is all very interesting,

but how does it change how I live next week?

How does Jesus getting baptised by John change my life?

Well let me have a stab.

For some of you, life is pretty difficult.

Some people are looking after grandkids

or other kids two generations down,

because the generation that should have been looking after them

dropped the ball.

Others have a real struggle in their work.

Others struggle with mess in their families.

Others have health problems themselves or in their families

that impact on them heavily.

Life can be pretty tough.

But Jesus is our representative.

Whatever the struggle,
we can say, Jesus has succeeded at this on our behalf.
That won't make the struggle go away.
But even if the struggle is hard and you feel defeated,
Jesus has beaten it.
And you are credited with his victory.
You are included in him.
God's not going to look at your meagre efforts and say,
"OK nice try, 1.5 out of 10."
No he will say,
You get credited with Jesus performance.
A+ for you.
And I think that can change the outlook when we face our problems.
We might not be able to beat them.
But that doesn't need to overwhelm us.
We can look at even a task that is impossible for us.
Doesn't matter if I fail.
I'll have a go.
But the outcome is not some all important measure of who I am.
Jesus is my representative.
And at the end of the day,
I get his score not mine.

This is my Son whom I love;
with him I am well pleased.
If God says that to Jesus and you are in Christ,
then God says that to you.
This is my Son,
this is my daughter.
I'm pleased with them.
Well pleased with them.
Because when I look at them,
I am seeing Jesus.
I don't see their failures.
I see Jesus.

We can also say the same about ourselves as a church.
It's tempting to look at ourselves and think about what we can't do.
It's difficult being a church in 21C Australia.
Let's be honest,
we barely scratch the surface of reaching out to Hastings.
Does 1% of our local community have direct contact with our church?
That means 99% doesn't.
You could feel defeated.
But we are the body of Christ.
And Christ is the Son whom God loves,
with whom he is well pleased.
We're not going to give up.
We'll give it our best shot.
But at the end of the day,
we're not worried about God saying to us,
"You guys didn't achieve much, Holy Trinity, did you?"
No. Jesus is our representative.
And everyone the Father wants to draw to Jesus through our church,
he will send to us.
And at the end of the say he will look at us and say,
"With you I am well pleased.
I'm looking at you and I'm seeing Jesus."