

A Resonating Moment: Jesus receives Affirmation from God

A message presented at St Albans Presbyterian Church by Rev Allan Smith, in January 2005

This is the first in a series of two sermons that are intended to enlarge upon our understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus, and in the experience of the Christian Community

Two Old Testament prophetic expectations are relevant:

1 The hope of a Spirit filled leader with the power of God permanently upon him. (Isaiah 9:6-7, 11:1-5, Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7, Micah 5:2&4)

2 The hope of a Spirit motivated and empowered community. (Ezekiel 36:25 -28, Joel 2:28-29, Jeremiah 31:31-34)

The birthing of Jesus' public ministry

We are exploring the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. From the outset it would seem Jesus chose to model his ministry on the 'Servant of God' pictured in the prophecies of Isaiah. As you listen to Isaiah 42 note the beautifully poetic description of compassion : "...He will not break off a bent reed or snuff out the wick of a flickering candle..." - and discern how the empathy of this 'servant' toward the vulnerable and weak in faith match the character traits of Jesus.

Isaiah 42 : 1 - 7

In the biographical background of most influential leaders are turning points that have crystallised ideas and compulsions - that when sparked by an particular incident, have burst into flame propelling that person toward their destiny. I believe we each in our own modest way, on looking back, would identify moments in our own lives that have shaped our own journey.

The Greek of the New Testament calls these *Kairos moments*; times when God intersects chronological time, with moments when 'time seems to stand still' and we sense something significant is happening. We instinctively know that if we respond, this moment will resonate in our experience, finding expression through enlarged attitudes, greater appreciation for the gift of life or a deeper commitment to something we consider of worth.

All four gospels indicate the Baptism of Jesus was a Kairos moment; the beginning of a profound change, propelling him from the obscurity of a carpenters bench into public spotlight as an itinerant preacher with an acute sense of divine mission.

Right person, right time, right place...

Hear the Gospel narrative from **Matthew 3 : 1 - 6, 11 - 17**. John came preaching "Turn away from your sins...." And Jesus senses his moment had come. Many Protestants are distracted onto a tangent by this passage: If Jesus was sinless, why did Jesus need to be baptised? We tend to equate sin with morality or immorality, especially of a sexual nature. Not so the Hebrews. In the Hebrew mindset, 'sin' was anything that inhibits relationship of people with God. In the Hebrew psyche sin was less a personal weakness and more a tribal or national failure to promote justice in society. Jesus identified with that.

If you read Luke's Gospel you discover the Baptist is preparing the way for a new era of God's involvement in the life of the nation. "Turn your attitudes around; get real about your faith! Get back to basics in preparation for Spiritual renewal; what God has promised is about to happen..." The task of the Baptiser was to create a rising tide of expectation in Israel. John saw himself as heralding a coming Messiah who would, in symbolic terms, baptise with the fire of God's Spirit burning off like

chaff all that is second rate in human behaviour, enabling the remaining wheat (the true seed of Abraham) to take root, sprout and grow a new Israel through whom God's salvation would be known and a quality of justice would shine as light for all nations to follow.

Jesus travelled from Nazareth to be part of this national movement of penitence in which baptism became a sign of sincerity.

Baptism was a radical step. No true Jew, son of Abraham, assured of God's salvation, would ever contemplate a need for baptism. Baptism was for foreigners wanting to convert to Judaism. Immersion in water symbolised a cleansing from the filth of Gentile paganism. Now, horror of horrors, here is John saying Jews were as despicable as Gentiles needing to be cleansed of religious impurity as much as any foreigner! John was confronting his countrymen with an individual need of commitment to God. Only Jews serious about their faith would have been baptised. Jesus was serious.

The significance of the Kairos moment of Jesus' baptism, for Jesus

When you read the gospels side by side you discover the emphasis is not actually on baptism but on what happened following baptism. Luke says: 'While Jesus was praying he became conscious of an overwhelming presence of God embracing him.' In gospel terms the Holy Spirit descended upon him.

Let's background this. Old Testament prophetic hope had coalesced into two major expectations:

The hope of a Spirit filled leader endowed with the power and authority of God permanently upon him. We are familiar with prophecies of Messiah; an expectation, that under the brutality of Roman occupation, was running at fever pitch. Jesus never used the title Messiah of himself and when Peter called him Messiah the disciples were cautioned against using the title in public. Presumably because public perception of Messiah as a revolutionary leader was light years away from Jesus' own perception of Messiah's role.

The second Old Testament expectation was the hope of a Spirit filled and guided community who would shine the light of God's salvation into all nations. Ezekiel, Isaiah, Joel and Jeremiah all voice this hope.

Jesus was well acquainted with these twin longings - and what today we would call his subjective experience of being endowed with a sense of divine calling needs to be interpreted out of the symbolic imagery of Hebrew scripture.

In a pre-scientific age the Jews used metaphor and simile to ground abstract concepts and this picturesque imagery ought not to be read as literal fact. The question to ask is: What emotion is being expressed; what human experience is being described?

In symbolic terms the heaven's opening signify a bold new creative act of God is breaking into history. In ancient scripture God's Spirit is occasionally pictured as a dove flying in with inspiration for prophesy. The dove descending on Jesus implies a new prophet has come; that it settled on Jesus implies that wisdom from God remained permanently with Jesus.

But it is the voice from heaven in the form of scriptural references burning into the consciousness of Jesus that hold the key to interpreting this life changing experience.

I am sure that many of you can recall scriptural texts that have come to mind proving totally appropriate to the circumstances of a particular occasion; Kairos insights for Kairos moments - God given!

Jewish scribes used a scriptural shorthand when quoting scripture; the first phrase of a text indicates that the whole associated text should be read. The gospel writers used this literary technique, here combining two references into one sentence. 'You are my Son whom I love' comes from Psalm 2, a psalm sung at the coronation of a Jewish King proclaiming him to be a son of God's choosing. The second quote: 'With you I am well pleased..' comes from today's Isaiah lection. The texts in their entirety make fascinating reading: 'You are my beloved Son, today I have become your Father. Ask

and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of earth your possession..' Now add the second quote: 'Here is my servant whom I uphold; my chosen one with whom I am well pleased. I have placed my Spirit upon him and he will bring justice to the nations..' How's that for a combined job specification and mission statement! From these scriptural insights Jesus knew himself not only authenticated and commissioned to fill Messiah's role, he was alerted that far from the glory anticipated for Messiah, his ministry would inevitably involve suffering and rejection - as Isaiah prophesied in his vision of a Suffering Servant. This was a Kairos moment of challenge and decision in the life of Jesus.

The sequel to Jesus' baptism

What happened next? Luke says: 'Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit returned from the Jordan River and was led by the Spirit into the desert, there to be tempted...' Have you ever noticed it was the Spirit, not the devil who led Jesus into temptation! Let's substitute the word 'tested' for temptation and the book of Deuteronomy (8 : 2) will put this incident into perspective "*Remember the way in which the Lord lead you in the desert testing you to know what is in your heart, whether you will keep God's commands or not*". The desert provided solitude for Jesus to sort out his priorities; thinking through possible avenues of fulfilling Messiah's role of instituting justice.

Jesus tested at least three approaches, questions that still bedevil the church.

- The first to turn stones into bread. Addressing unequal distribution of resources - how best to distribute long term aid to those in need? Jesus teaches "*Man does not live by bread alone!*"
- A mountain top view invites Jesus to meet popular expectations; to be a provider of freedom! But is the George W Bush response, of political and military clout, the way to go? We are to '*Honour and serve God alone*' without compromise!
- Leaping from the Temple questions the appropriate mandate for enlarging the realm of God within a dis-interested culture in society? Just who are we promoting, by a spectacular religious display? Do not test God's patience beyond endurance.

The devil in temptation is discerning the best from many second bests. Jesus did not compromise the prophetic vision of total dependence upon God implied by the voice from heaven

The record continues : Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit Luke says Jesus initiated his ministry in his hometown synagogue with a quote from Isaiah summarising the job profile Jesus had chosen to follow. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me. He has chosen me to bring good news to those who know they are in need. Proclaim liberty to those captive to insecurity; recovery of sight for those who have lost it; release for those who feel oppressed, and announce that this is the time of God's favour. Jesus said : This passage of scripture is now being fulfilled. (Isaiah 61 : 1 - 2, Luke 4 : 18 - 19)

The first three gospels define the central thrust of Jesus' teaching in a single sentence; The right time is now, the Kingdom of God is close, turn away from your sin, believe this good news.. It was the same message proclaimed by John the Baptist.

The significance of Jesus' baptism, for us

It is often pointed out that from this point there is seldom mention of the Holy Spirit in the gospels. To me, this is totally invalid. The gospel writers all assume that everything that Jesus did; his teaching, healing, expelling evil influence, restoring ostracised people to self respect is done through the energising power of the Spirit of God permanently with Jesus. Peter says as much. In the home of the Roman Cornelius (The first Gentile to become a Spirit filled Christian) Peter sums up the ministry of Jesus : God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and power: He went about doing good and healing those oppressed by the devil - because God was with him.

When New Testament writers speak of Jesus being full of the Holy Spirit what are they meaning in modern terms? I think they are saying that Jesus consciously drew on the available energy of God believing that when he acted in faith to enlarge the realm of God, God would follow through; the healing, the reconciling or whatever would happen. As Hebrews 11 says ; having faith is 'being sure

of the things we hope for, and certain of things we cannot yet see! If Jesus with his sense of commitment was dependant upon God in this way, how much more are we?

I have intentionally shaped this as a teaching sermon because, moving among churches as a volunteer minister in parishes without a resident minister, I have found considerable ambiguity surrounding the way Jesus worked in God's Name and about the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of Jesus and in ourselves as followers of Jesus. There seems little realisation that the enabling energy of God's presence was the source of power Jesus relied on and said would be available to his followers to enable them to convey the grace of God to other people.

It would seem many church attendees imagine that Jesus was able to what he did because he was somehow half divine. An advantage that I, and I suspect a few of you do not have! It seems to me the New Testament declares Jesus to be fully human - tested in every way we are - but remaining open and totally committed to God's purposes. That was his plus factor. I love the poetic phrases of an early Christian song quoted by Paul in Philippians 2 - he always had the nature of God but emptied himself of divinity; becoming human, he humbled himself, walking the way of obedience as a servant.

If dependence upon the refining and purifying presence of God's Spirit is the way God has chosen to work through the Christian community - and we aspire to serve God in Jesus' name, then openness and willingness to receive strength from God the way Jesus did, is foundational to being Christian.

May the grace of Christ be with you, the love of God surround you and the strength of the Holy Spirit inspire you.