

**Solidarity and solitude** (Luke 3.15-22)*The baptism of Jesus*

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Well, once again this Sunday we've taken a chronological leap in our recapitulation of the gospel story. Jesus is now thirty, and on the cusp of commencing his public ministry and mission. Prior to that commencement, Luke records two experiences that complete his preparation for this work - his baptism in the river Jordan, and his 'retreat' in the wilderness. These days, we might speak of these as 'spiritual' experiences, since they relate to connections in the spiritual realm. Having said that, there's nothing ethereal or escapist about either of these encounters; both happened in the context of a physical place and action, and both had a *grounding* effect on Jesus and the outworking of his mission.

Today, we focus primarily on the first experience, his baptism, and it's interesting to see how Luke portrays this event. As has been the case since the start of this gospel, Luke juxtaposes Jesus and John the Baptist in ways that illuminate both their connectedness and some significant differences. It is John who baptises Jesus, who has the crowds (and authorities) hopping, who is fanning Messianic expectancy and excitement. At the same time, John is clear that he is *not* the Messiah and that his part is to prepare people for the one who is. '*I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming*', John proclaims (16). '*I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals... He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*' Immediately after this, in a twist which doesn't fit the pattern which John has just outlined, Jesus is baptised by John, not the other way around. What's more, despite John's dramatic build-up, Jesus's appearance is noted quite cursorily

and matter-of-factly. *‘Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased”,’* Luke writes (21-22).

The distinctive nature of the portrayal here in Luke becomes even more striking when you compare it with other gospel accounts. In Matthew’s version, for example, Jesus’s baptism is separated (by an intervening paragraph) from the description about others being baptised – as if Matthew is highlighting it. Also, in Matthew’s account, John protests about being asked to do this baptism on the grounds that Jesus is greater. In Luke, we get no sense that John even recognises Jesus, or that Jesus’ baptism is really distinguished from anyone else. Luke’s account is different to Mark’s as well. In Mark, the descent of the Spirit and divine affirmation occur *‘just as’* Jesus rises from the water (Mk 1.10). In Luke, it happens *not* at the moment of baptism, but *afterwards* (who knows how long) when Jesus is praying: *‘and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened and...’* Here, the focus subtly shifts from the event of baptism to the action of praying. In other words, Luke seems to be suggesting that the affirmation and spiritual empowerment so vital in Jesus’ ministry was connected with his practice of prayer (which we know was ongoing) and not simply to do with his baptism. This seems consistent with the story of the early church, which Luke (the same writer) records in the book of Acts. Here, the Pentecost outpouring of Spirit follows an important period during which the disciples are said to be *‘constantly devoting themselves to prayer’* (Acts 1.14).

Now, all this comparing and contrasting of accounts might seem technical and pedantic. If that's all it was, I wouldn't waste time with it. But each of the evangelists offers a different window into the person and mission of Jesus, so the detail of Luke's portrayal matters. Since Christmas at St N's, we've been contemplating the importance of growing in wisdom. I've noted how Luke seems keen to communicate that Jesus did not arrive on the scene fully formed and mature, that it took time for him to live into his vocation, that it entailed learning and growth. Since we too are called to grow in wisdom, I've been discerning from our readings some of the dispositions and practices that enable it. Two weeks ago, we noted the openness of the twelve-year old Jesus, his willingness to sit with teachers in the Temple asking questions and testing understanding. We also noticed Mary's willingness to treasure and ponder that which she did not yet understand. Last week, we contrasted the disposition of the Magi with that of the chief priests and scribes. The Magi practiced wholehearted attention, open-minded exploration and humble responsiveness, and grew in wisdom. The others displayed none of these dispositions and, unsurprisingly, remained exactly as they were – self-satisfied, locked in old ruts and, in biblical terms, fools.

This week, the reading invites reflection on two other practices that appear to have been vital for Jesus and that are vital for us as well – solidarity and solitude. On the one hand, Jesus is committed to solidarity – to *being with others*. As Luke portrays it, he not only participates in John's baptism *like* others, but he also does it *with* others. 'Now when *all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized*', Luke says, associating them all together, in contrast to Matthew, who treats them separately.

Solidarity, identifying with the rest of humanity, Luke seems to be saying, was intrinsic to Jesus's way of being, his wisdom.

And yet, so also was solitude, time alone in the presence of his heavenly father, practising prayer – being empowered for his work and receiving his deepest identity: *'and when Jesus ... was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased".'* Interestingly, the next event of Jesus's preparation, (in chapter 4) involves an extended period of solitude, during which time his understanding and commitment is tested and refined. In the wilderness, Jesus faces the question of how he will enact his vocation as Messiah. *'The ways he declined, were [temptations] ... which would have destroyed His **solidarity** with the people He had come to save'* (Beasley-Murray 1973.60, my emphasis). In other words, in the very next episode of Jesus's life, we see the same themes being played out – solitude and solidarity – *being with others, being alone in prayer*. Both practices were vital in enabling Jesus to grow in wisdom and to maintain the integrity of his identity and vocation. And, same applies to us.

**Practicing solidarity** helps to ground us, to maintain warmth and connection with our neighbour and the ecology of the earth. Solidarity guides the expression of our vocation in the world. **Practicing solitude** helps to clarify and restore vision and energy. Solitude collects and connects us with the realm of spirit, and deep truths of our identity and vocation. Both practices are necessary. If we fill our lives to overflowing with involvement and activity, immersed only in the complexity and needs of community, then inevitably we become distracted, divided, exhausted, and cynical. On the other hand, if we opt out and spend all our time alone, then we become

isolated, self-obsessed and vain, we can lose our sense of humour, our place and purpose, and even our sanity. It is unwise to have one without the other. *'Let [the one] who cannot be alone beware of community'*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his wonderful reflection, *Life Together* (1954.77), and *'let [the one] who is not in community beware of being alone. Each by itself has profound perils and pitfalls.'*

It's important to recognise that, in saying this, Bonhoeffer wasn't recommending some half-hearted compromise, which I suspect is what many of us can settle for. What's needed is a disciplined commitment to both. A bit like the tide ebbing and flowing, solidarity and solitude need to be practised dynamically. In Jesus' life, each movement informs the other, and practised in rhythm they make him wise ... he seems to know what to do in difficult situations, he doesn't get carried away or distracted or thrown off course. There's an authority and clarity.

It makes sense in theory. But in practise we don't necessarily find it that easy to practise these disciplines of solidarity and solitude. What is it that inhibits us? It's probably a range of things. Laziness, lack of awareness, lack of know-how ... And maybe the lurking shadow is fear. We hold back from truly being with others – fear being overwhelmed by need and demand ... being used ... losing our freedom and sense of self. Possibly we also fear being shown up – being shamed or rejected or disappointed. Far safer to hold back a bit, keep some distance, erect a wall and call it self-care. And we also hold back from truly being alone. We fear the silence, the stillness of inaction, non-achievement. We're afraid of being overwhelmed by loneliness, anxiety, lust, resentment, boredom, grief ... If solidarity confronts us with the demons of others, solitude confronts us with our own.

And yet if we want a share in Jesus's work in the world, his healing presence and freedom to be himself, then these demons must be faced. In truth, all of our fears are already at work in some way or other. What the practices of solidarity and solitude do is reveal the ways they undermine what's good and true. But, more than that, these practices help us to discern how to respond wisely, which is why, as challenging as it can be to practise them, it is worth persisting, and when necessary, beginning again.

### **References**

Beasley-Murray, G (1973) *Baptism in the New Testament*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI.

Bonhoeffer, D (1954) *Life Together*, Harper & Row, New York.