

Pressing the Start Button
Baptism of the Lord, Year A
Matthew 3: 13-17
9 January 2010

For the first 500 years of the church's life baptisms went something like this. The candidate was immersed up to their thighs in water. Sometimes they were nude. The baptiser would tip them over backwards, and would fully immerse them three times. Customs varied as to what happened next. Sometimes the candidate had hands laid on them; sometimes the sign of the cross was made on their foreheads, sometimes they were anointed with oil instead. This represented the conferring of the Holy Spirit.

It was assumed that repentance, firm faith, and a lengthy preparation period would precede baptism. The benefits of baptism were taken to be the forgiveness of sins and the receiving of the Holy Spirit.

We can see many of these elements present in the baptism of Jesus. But the differences are even more significant. He, the sinless one, did not need the forgiveness of sins. And while the Holy Spirit was powerfully involved in what took place then, it would have been in a different way to what happened at our baptism.

There were those who argued that Jesus was the special person he was because the Holy Spirit had possessed him decisively at his baptism. In other words there was a before and after – before he was just another human being – after he was the Spirit endowed Saviour. But the Church was never prepared to wear this error, which it called

adoptionism, because it failed to account for the wonder that had happened at Christmas.

So what had occurred when Jesus was born and this unique individual entered the stream of human existence? To make sense of that we need to get a line on what God is like in himself, and on what life with God will be like beyond this life. My way of thinking about the essential reality of God is to consider him as pure being, radiant energy pulsing being, luminescent being who lights up all in his orbit with a compassion and love that is these qualities in their most dynamic form. To be with God will be to be surrounded by this radiant force field.

In the wonder of the incarnation this pure being had entered human experience, had teamed up with a human nature that by definition was non-being or derivative being. Limited, death bound creatures that we are, we come from our creator with a reflection of his image, but without the freshness of being that is who and what He is. For this union of the divine and human natures to have integrity the pure being that had come from God the Father would reside in Jesus in a discrete and self-limiting way. There were heavenly privileges that the God-man Jesus renounced in order to be with us in such a way that his humanity was truly integral to who He was. The freely accepted limitations of his existence would have been to the fore in the hidden years of his growing up in Galilee.

The baptism of Jesus is the start signal for his public ministry. All that we shall hear about in the gospel accounts for the rest of the year of what he said and did is inaugurated here. Something had

changed then when the Spirit turned up at the Jordan.

What had happened, I think, was that the Spirit had pressed the start button that would activate some of the potentials that had been latent in Jesus since the pure being of his divine nature had entered in to union with his human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary. An extra capacity had been released at the very moment that his public ministry got under way. He became more for the more required of him in his mission to save the world.

In the Scriptures the Holy Spirit has a self-effacing quality in which he often draws attention away from himself while serving others. Sometimes that has led the church to become forgetful of him, or to write him down in its estimation, in the way that faithful family servants often fail to receive the appreciation and gratitude that is their due. If our religion is all Jesus and no Spirit then something odd is going on. And as church history shows, when the Holy Spirit is shoved out the front door he returns through the back door in a most unexpected way.

How then shall we honour the Spirit in such a way that does justice to his particular and peculiar qualities of being and mission? For a start we might give thanks for the reality that he is the one who pressed our start button to get us started as Christians. It is a very mysterious business the process by which people become persuaded and motivated to become Christians. Often we struggle to explain it to others. What seems to happen is that the Holy Spirit finds a unique way, a particular bait to hook that particular person. We might like to think a bit this coming week about how the Spirit enticed us in to faith. Sure Jesus is the chief agent

of salvation in our religion but who was it who introduced us to him?

Many of us too will have experienced the Holy Spirit as a spirit of consolation and of inspiration. For sure God is close to the broken hearted, especially close to them. I hope we have all experienced times when God has put his arms around us and comforted us. Since he is an invisible presence it is the Holy Spirit who has done that. And when I think about what goes on in the process of human creativity I am clear that it is about the ability to make connections between different bits of knowledge and experience that are stored in different parts of our brain. Sure, we have to do the hard work to research and acquire these different bits – but when the 90% of perspiration has been put in the 10% of inspiration has to come in. And while there are things we can do to make that magic moment more rather than less likely there is often an x factor that comes in that cant be explained from just our own resources.

Though hidden and humble at present in his style of operations I think the Holy Spirit will come in to his own in the future. I take seriously those theologians who say that he is the completer and perfecter of our salvation. I think Robert Jenson was on to something when he argued that the Father trusts the Spirit so much that he has authorised him to construct the future, and that on the basis of this complete trust he is prepared to allow it to be as much of a surprise to him as it will be to us. The capacity to surprise is at the heart of a satisfying relationship, and that is certainly a hallmark of the Spirit's personality. And like any satisfying story the human story draws us in by our curiosity about how it will turn out, but at the end we will say, "Of

course, now I see it couldn't have been any other way, you clever Holy Spirit."