

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 7”
Matthew 3:13-17

Don't you love it when a plan comes together? We've seen it very much in evidence over the past couple of weeks with the Olympic Games – the whole show coming together after the seven years of planning since London was awarded the opportunity to stage the games. We saw it in the amazing opening ceremony as Danny Boyle's vision burst into life with thousands of dancers, musicians and performers following the carefully choreographed script. We've seen it as Dave Brailsford's meticulously planned assault on the world cycling titles came to fruition in the performances Bradley Wiggins, Chris Hoy, Sarah Trott and the others. As several of the cycling team have said in interviews, everything peaked and came together at exactly the right time.

And in the reading we've just had this morning, we see God's amazing plan for the salvation of the world coming together as Jesus begins his ministry. Last week we looked at John the Baptist and the way that he prepared for the arrival of his cousin on the scene. (We'll bump into John the Baptist again in this Gospel when we reach chapter 11.) But now we finally meet the one to whom he was pointing. And we may think that, after these first couple of chapters of Matthew's Gospel, there doesn't appear to have been a great deal of planning. We've read about Jesus' birth and had a couple of stories about Herod and John, but there's been a long silence – thirty years, in fact – between the birth stories and Jesus' arrival as a fully grown man about to embark on his mission, to fulfil his destiny. Where's all the planning in that?

But as we've said each week so far, and as Matthew has repeatedly made clear in his references back to the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, this moment has been prophesied, prepared for and planned out since the very beginning of time. Jesus appears where John is preaching and baptising, out in the Desert of Judea (3:1) and joins him at the River Jordan. Nothing particularly surprising there. But as John comes up out of the water after baptising the latest batch of repentant Jews, Jesus asks if he can be baptised too. Quite understandably, John expresses some surprise at the request and tries to talk Jesus out of it. John's baptism is all about repentance and surely Jesus has nothing of which to repent.

But Jesus insists and explains the significance of this. He tells John that it is “*to fulfil all righteousness*” (v15). It's time for the silence to be broken. God is waiting to reveal himself to all humanity. Many commentators point out that Matthew is using the word translated “*righteousness*” here in a very different way from the normal usage. And both Eugene Peterson in his version, *The Message*, and Tom Wright in his *The New Testament For Everyone* translate this verse in a way which brings out the full force of what Jesus is saying. Peterson writes, “*But Jesus insisted. ‘Do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.’*” And Tom Wright puts it like this: “*This is how it's got to be right now. This is the right way to complete God's whole saving plan.*” Here's Jesus – and you'll remember that his names are to be Jesus, the Saviour, and Emmanuel, God with us – coming to save humanity from the consequences, the power and the effects of sin, and standing with us, with fallen humanity, as he identifies with us all in being baptised. Now we can see God and see what he is like. Jesus is ready to go.

And here we have the whole of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – involved in the launch of this amazing plan of redemption. All three persons of the Trinity – all three aspects of God, if you like – are active here as the eternal plan of God, his project to save us and eradicate evil, come together at this crucial time. What is happening here?

1. ANNOUNCED BY JOHN

The coming of God into our world, his arrival and identification with us, has been heralded by John the Baptist. As we saw last week, John is effectively the last of the Old Testament prophets and the only authentic prophet in that tradition in the New Testament. John's message, too, is the climax of all that

Old Testament prophecy and promise. This is the fulfilment of all the things that had been preached and written about the arrival of the kingly Messiah in the centuries leading up to this moment.

We've made the point over and over again – mainly because Matthew himself does just that – that Jesus' arrival on the scene has been promised and prepared for for years. The people of Israel had been looking out for this kingly Messiah figure, this Christ person since God's first promise to Adam and Eve as he threw them out of the Garden of Eden that he would eventually stamp out evil – literally “stamp it out” as he tells the evil one that the offspring of Eve will eventually “*crush your head*” (*Genesis 3:15*).

And then the prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and all the others – have proclaimed to the people that a Messiah figure is on his way. Someone is coming who will institute God's kingly rule on earth, who will usher in the Kingdom of God, and with that start the process which will ensure that God's plan succeeds. In the words we looked at last week from the earlier part of this chapter we read of John's insistence that Jesus is the one who pulls all this together. Jesus is, in the words of the title of another of Tom Wright's books, *The Climax Of the Covenant*. Now he's here. John's work is done and Jesus now takes over as the plan really takes effect. All the trailers have been screened, now the main feature, which we've all been waiting for, is here and ready to go. And as John finally consents to baptise Jesus, the other players appear.

2. ANOINTED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

Now this particular event and the significance of all the various aspects of it has kept scholars and preachers and theologians busy for centuries. There are all kinds of theories about what is actually going on here, but I won't bore you with all that this morning – if you want to know more, get a commentary and read it up for yourself. (There are some up in the Library if you want to borrow one.) Let's just look at what Matthew tells us, at what we can be sure about.

Jesus comes up from the water. You cannot read this in any other way than as an description of baptism by immersion. And as he does so, the skies open. That may mean that the clouds parted, or maybe there really was a glimpse into God's throne room of heaven through the torn fabric of reality. And at that point the Holy Spirit arrives. John tries to get a handle on it by describing this as the Spirit “*descending like a dove and lighting on him*”. Jesus is about to begin his ministry on earth. The plan is coming to fruition. And if that is going to happen, then Jesus needs the help of the Holy Spirit, he needs to be filled with all the power God can give him. Paul puts it like this in *Colossians 1:19*: “*For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him.*”

As we've said before, we have no idea what was going on in Jesus' life between his return from Egypt as a toddler and this moment here. There are a few very odd accounts of his childhood in some of the apocryphal gospels, the accounts of his life that were not deemed worthy of inclusion in our Bible because it wasn't clear that they were inspired by God or because what they described didn't tie up with the four accounts which we do have. But most people who have studied all this would say that this is the point at which Jesus' ministry really begins, so this is the point at which he needs the help of the Holy Spirit.

And the Spirit does for Jesus pretty well what he does for his followers from the time of Pentecost onwards. The Holy Spirit **equips** Jesus for the task ahead of him. It is the Spirit who enables Jesus to fulfil the mission that God has given him. And he **empowers** Jesus, filling him with the wisdom, discernment, authority and insight which he needs to heal the sick, to identify and deal with the demonic powers of evil, to speak with authority into the lives of those who need to hear the word of God, to challenge those who have set themselves against the good news of the Kingdom.

That same Holy Spirit, the gift of God passed on to us through the work of Jesus, still works in people's lives today. You too can be equipped and empowered to carry out the work of God's Kingdom. You too

can be used by God in his plans for this world. All you need to do is, as Jesus did, be humble and accept what God offers.

3. AFFIRMED BY GOD THE FATHER

And then, as Jesus is visibly touched by the Holy Spirit, there's an audible sign as well. A voice is heard, which Matthew says is "*from heaven*", so from the throne of God himself, affirming Jesus as his Son and expressing his pleasure that Jesus is obediently commencing his ministry. Here is the proof that something special is going on. Not only is there this supernatural voice, but the voice is actually identifying Jesus as his much-loved and pleasing Son. It's the ultimate job reference, really.

From this moment on Jesus will speak, teach, heal, challenge, rebuke and encourage with the authority of God the Father. When he overturns tables in the Temple – his Father's house – when he turns water into wine, calms storms, walks on the lake, exorcises demons, feeds crowds, answers the questions of lawyers, priests, kings and governors, he will do so with the authority of God, the God who created the world and liberated his people and now plans to sweep evil from the universe once and for all.

And this is the moment, according to John's Gospel and Letters, when God demonstrated his love for fallen humanity. "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*" (John 3:16) "*This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*" (1 John 4:9,10). Jesus is ready to go!

As we said earlier on, this brings together Father, Son and Holy Spirit – the Holy Trinity – ready to change the world, to save humanity, to redeem creation. In a sense the baptism itself is incidental: yes, it provides an opportunity for Jesus to identify with human beings. But it is an opportunity for the ministry of Jesus, the fulfilment of Old Testament promises and prophecies, to kick off in an unmistakable way. Jesus is here to show that God loves us so much that he wants to be with us, and to help us to see the potential of the Holy Spirit in equipping and empowering those who decide to follow Jesus. May we know God's presence and experience the touch of the Holy Spirit.

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Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think Jesus felt the need to be baptised? What are the implications for our baptism?
2. What does John's ministry add to Jesus' ministry? Is he necessary?
3. In what ways does the Holy Spirit equip and empower Jesus? Does this mean that Jesus didn't have the Holy Spirit before this point? And does that mean he wasn't fully God?
4. Can we know the equipping and empowering of the Holy Spirit in the same way as Jesus did? (Look at *John 14:12*. Does that throw any light on this?)
5. How does God's affirmation of Jesus affect all this? Why do you think God said he was pleased with Jesus?