

This is not the time to talk about baptism...is it? Can we really just ignore the obvious and stick to the expectations of a church calendar that tell us – now that Christmas is ‘over’ – that we need to hurry up and get the rest of the story told so we don’t miss Easter...?

Every three years (if we follow the lectionary) we must come to terms with this unnatural time travelling proposal: Manger – Wise Men – Jesus baptized at the Jordan. Thirty years (give or take) in four Sundays worth of Scripture.

Now I prefer the discipline of the Lectionary, which invites me to read deeply these texts that the three year cycle regularly brings into view. I delight (usually) in finding new ways to encounter the familiar stories that Scripture wants to tell. But today I am challenged by events in the world: Murder and mayhem that threatens to engulf all of us; challenging climate conditions that have set an entire continent ablaze; the deep grief that comes with the sudden and reprehensible loss of life through a plane crash.

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The world into which Jesus was born - and the time and the culture in which He ministered - was by any standards an hazardous and violent place. Rome brought order and infrastructure; culture and civil discipline;

but all that 'progress' came at a great price. Rome required more than simple obedience; Rome expected subservience. The Emperor was (following the example of Augustus, the first to claim the title) a self-declared deity; the ruling class in particular were convinced of their moral, cultural, ethical and social superiority. Wealth was in the hands of a select few individuals.

So to be clear, the world was only a dangerous place for those on the outside of the power structure; for those whose land was occupied by Roman troops; for those who were in any way reluctant to accept Roman expressions of leadership, superiority or cultural orderliness.

Some of the residents of Roman territory managed to make their peace with their overlords but others asked difficult questions.

John the Baptist was asking tough questions - questions about the way religion was being coopted for political gain and the comfort of a select few. John was hot for the topic, in fact, and drew crowds that included those whom he accused. And out of nowhere comes Jesus.

Fully grown and at an age that enables (indeed insisted) that he take some responsibility for his religious choices, Jesus marches to the edge of the Jordan and insists that John baptize him.

It is a strange request - one that John accepts only reluctantly. There is more going on here than Matthew can reveal. Had Jesus already started to gain a reputation as a student (on a teacher)?

This is all speculation, of course, but it seems we are meant to imagine (by the way Matthew tells the story) that John knows something about Jesus from the beginning.

What is important for our purposes is that Jesus comes to a man who is railing against the mismanagement of religious authority - against the idea of religion in the service of political gain - and says "count me in."

Jesus baptism by John sets Jesus in the middle of the political wrangling that has powerful people screaming "God is on our side!"

Yes, it is a ritual of repentance. Yes, it is a sign of his willingness to embark on a fresh path toward's the promised kingdom of God (though in light of my argument Kingdom is a word I use reluctantly to describe the notion of God's desire for complete cultural, spiritual, political and personal renewal) but we need to reclaim the politically pertinent thrust of Jesus activity. You cannot separate the gospel imperative to feed the hungry from a political promise to eliminate poverty. The command to love your neighbour as yourself is a jarring condemnation of the foreign policy of some nations that describe themselves as Christian. Scriptural assertions about the glory of creation, and God's providence of (and for) that creation might well

The state of the World

inform our policies on energy management, resource extraction and the human catastrophe that is climate change.

Jesus call to us is a divine call to action in every sphere of life - ethics, relationships, and yes, politics. Jesus' baptism is a startling political declaration before it is an act of faith - and it is a decision about which God seems well pleased. As disciples of Jesus, we must look at our relationship with the world around us and wonder - might that heavenly voice say the same of us?

Amen