

Sermon Jan 8 2023

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Baptism is the way of becoming a member of the church. It has had this role since the earliest church, when believers were baptised after a long period of preparation. We baptise our children too as a symbol of their belonging to the family of God.

But it wasn't a new rite with the church. The Jewish religion had baptism too, a ritual cleansing in water, to remove sins. It probably had more of the role of confession and absolution.

When Jesus came to John asking for baptism, John knew that here was someone different, someone whose sandals he was unworthy to even touch. John knew that Jesus was from God, part of God, and therefore pure. So why then was he coming for baptism?

Remember that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. I think he offered himself for baptism as an example to others, that everyone could repent and be cleansed from their sins, to herald in the new Kingdom of God! But Jesus' baptism was different. Instead of being handed a lit candle, and welcomed to the family of Christ like we do know, Jesus heard directly from his Father in heaven – This is my son, the beloved. With him I am well pleased.

What a beginning for his public ministry! This was the anointing with the Holy Spirit, which was seen descending on him like a dove! From this time, Jesus could heal and cast out demons. He was a man of power!

When we look into our reading from Isaiah, we see more of the picture of Jesus. Prophecy from hundreds of years before Jesus was born calls him the suffering servant, and paints in him a light that is not outwardly powerful, but still very active, and, most importantly, compassionate. The people of Israel at Jesus' time were used to power and glory, with the Roman occupation. But they weren't used to compassion. Isaiah says: a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.

Back in the day a reed was used as a pen, and also for roofing, making boats and many other things. A bruised reed would be no use for a pen – it would be all floppy. Would you use a ballpoint that was unscrewed and didn't make a clear line? No, neither would I. But instead of breaking a bruised reed and throwing away, the suffering servant – Jesus – will not do this. Do you feel like a bruised reed sometimes? We all have times when we are so battered by life that we feel very bruised. This scripture tells us that Jesus will not break us and throw us away. Instead he will lovingly nurture those who are bruised and broken, healing and bringing us into wholeness.

How about a dimly burning wick? When oil lamps were used to light houses, the wick could burn part way through, and be a danger for dropping off and causing a fire. People kept an eye on the wicks that weren't burning upright and brightly, the ones that just smouldered, horizontal, until the end dropped off and caused a problem. There would often be a bowl of water below these lamps in case of such an accident.

But Jesus will not snuff out or quench the wick that is not burning properly. Sometimes our faith is a dimly burning wick. Sometimes we don't know how

to shine brightly. We are too exhausted, too disappointed by life, by faith, by God, to have the energy to keep going. We want to give up. But God never gives up on us. God will not quench our dimly burning wick. Instead, he will trim off the bit that is spent, put us in a better place to draw up the fuel so we can burn brightly!

What might this look like in your life? First, the old stuff which is no longer producing anything, the ash end, will be trimmed away. This might mean things that no longer bear fruit. Relationships that are more toxic than life-giving. Habits that sap our time and energy. Anything that we can let go of. New Year's resolutions seem to be full of these. Have you made any resolutions this year? They often seem a good idea on New Year's day, - especially if you stand on the scales - but by a week afterwards, like now, they have long gone by the wayside. Use this early part of the year to examine your life, your relationships, your habits. How you spend time, money, energy. If there is anything that needs to be trimmed away, bring it to God in prayer. (We will have the ministry of healing later during this service, and maybe this will be an opportunity for you to ask for this help.)

How about the fuel? A dimly burning wick is not sucking up the oil any more, so it doesn't produce light. What is your fuel? Is it time with God in prayer? Reading scripture? Fellowshiping with others? Gossiping the Gospel? I sometimes wonder if in our interactions with each other, with other Christians, we are so caught up with social, day-to-day news, that we forget to tell each other what God has been doing in our lives. Maybe this could be the year that you gossip the Gospel more, that you tell people what a difference faith has made to you. Practise with each other first, then when you are confident sharing your active faith, tell people who are not yet part of the

kingdom! Maybe this will be how your light burns, and will bring blessing to you and those you encounter this year.

Let's look again at the last bit after the reeds and the wicks – he will faithfully bring forth justice.

Justice is a tricky concept. The prophetic idea of justice demands a concern and compassion for the weak, the downtrodden and outcasts in need. It's not about locking them up and throwing away the key, or bootcamps for young offenders, like our politicians perennially suggest. If we use the Biblical concept of justice to tackle for example the young people who are doing over dairies, we would be looking deep into their homes, their communities, their learning difficulties, the intergenerational reasons why they behave as they do. Compassion, Jesus-type justice, looks at the causes and starts at the ground up of society to make a difference.

This is what we are called to do as members of Christ's church. We must show that compassion and love wherever it is needed, and by working for a truly compassionate and just society, where all the needs are met, we will make a difference in our world.

Dear friends, are you ready for the challenge of bringing the kingdom of God to New Zealand in 2023?