

## “That All Righteousness Be Fulfilled”

Presented by Ken Thomas.

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This is a short scripture, just five verses, but it is so full of meaning one could talk for hours on it. Relax, I won't. Most of you are likely familiar with the story - we have seen many artists renderings of the scene, usually depicting a dove coming from a blue sky with radiant sunshine, descending upon a handsome man with long flowing hair. Others show a very pastoral setting beside a peaceful river bank, with crowds on the bank and John in the water. And we can tell which one is Jesus. He is tall, handsome, his robes are immaculate. He may even be fluorescent - he glows.

I always like to take a quick look at the Greek when I prepare a text. The Greek word we translate as baptizing literally means “dipping”. John was dipping people, dipping them, in the Jordan. Take a deep breath. Now, we don't call him John the Dipper, or John the Dopter. I suppose that seems a little silly, but in fact it highlights an essential question. What was going on that transforms dipping into baptizing?

Well let's start by talking about the Jordan River. If you look at a map, it is clear that if you want to get to Palestine from Egypt you cross Gaza and turn north up the coast. But at the time of the exodus the coast was occupied by heavily fortified hostile cities. So in the Hebrew exodus story they went south of the Dead Sea, came north on the east side of the sea and gathered on the east side of the Jordan. Then they crossed the Jordan into the central hill country. Hence the Jordan River has always had powerful symbolic meaning to the Jewish people.

For example, a few years before John and Jesus, a charismatic Jewish leader gathered about 4000 followers on the east side of the Jordan and then crossed the river in a re-enactment of the earlier crossing. They surrounded the walls of Jerusalem and blew trumpets, expecting that God would make the walls fall down, signaling the beginning of a successful liberation from Rome and what they saw as the corrupt Temple authorities. Unfortunately, the walls did not fall down, instead, the Roman garrison came marching out, and the whole enterprise went downhill from there in a rather nasty fashion.

So, for a start, as John Dominic Crossan says - the point is not that John was **baptizing** in the Jordan. The point is John was baptizing in the **Jordan**. The use of water for ritual purification had been common for centuries and John could have done his dipping in any of a number of places. But John was a clever subversive. John was calling Jews from all over Judea to repent, to change their ways, to adopt a pious life, to live in expectation of the coming kingdom of God. But not amassing a force on the Jordan. He was calling people into the Jordan and then sending them back, out of the Jordan, to their homes, where they would form a different kind of force. They would lead the people of Israel back to right relationship with God, they would restore proper adherence to the ancient covenant. Then and only then would God liberate the people. You didn't get baptized until after you repented.

So for John, while the use of water was well established for purifying rituals, it was the call to repentance that transformed the dipping into baptism - so that all righteousness would be fulfilled, by repentance and right living. And as Jurgen Moltman points out, John's baptism was an eschatological baptism. That is a big word for end times. His baptism was based on a belief in the imminent coming of God's kingdom, an event that would liberate the truly faithful from the oppressions of the day. However, it is a kingdom of judgment. Therefore true repentance, is essential to prepare for the kingdom, which means turning away from the evils of the day, both Roman and the practices of the Jewish leaders, secular and religious, who were in league with the Romans,.

But with Jesus something else happens. The Holy Spirit descends upon him, and the voice of God pronounces "this is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." And then, as the story continues Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted. The baptism of Jesus by John is one of those events in the Bible that has a high likelihood of historical accuracy. All three synoptic gospel writers acknowledge the baptism but they try to downplay it. In the gospel of John, John the Baptist is a witness to the descent of the Holy Spirit, but there is no mention of the baptism. It was clearly a problem for the early Christians, who were in tension with the followers of John, as it was John who baptized Jesus, not other way around. In fact, some scholars suggest Jesus may have originally been a follower of John, and but went his own way after John's arrest.

So then who are these two men are who are meeting in the river. The first lives in the wilderness eating locusts and wild honey. He is leading a movement of repentance that is challenging the religious establishment, and has a nervous King Herod looking over one shoulder and the Romans undoubtedly looking nervously over the other. The second man is the Beloved Son of God, Messiah and redeemer of Israel, who is about to launch a ministry that will profoundly change the world. And for their troubles, one soon will be arrested and beheaded, and the other eventually crucified by the Romans. These were two very serious men meeting in the middle of the Jordan River, about to take a very serious action.

In Acts 19, Paul is described as meeting a group of Jews who are followers of John the Baptist, who have been baptized in the baptism of John, but they know nothing about baptism in the Holy Spirit. So Paul baptizes them in the name of Jesus and the Holy Spirit descends upon them. In one sense, this can be seen as representing the continual tension between Christians and followers of John, and the determination of the author of Luke/Acts to to reinforce the superiority of the Christian baptism. But it also points to the essential element that for Christians transforms water into baptism - the Holy Spirit.

But this does not negate repentance, for like John, Jesus also preached repentance - "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand. "Go and sin no more." Indeed, Fred Hare suggests that it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized by John, firstly as a symbolic act of repentance and new life, to mark the beginning of his public ministry, but also as an act of solidarity with the rest of his people, whom he had come to save. Jesus was both fully human and fully divine. As he had been born human, as he would die human, so he must symbolize his repentance and be baptized as a human. As he tells John - "For now it must be done this way, so that all righteousness might be fulfilled."

John Wesley, whose work still resonates for me, wrote a wonderful sermon on the Lord's Righteousness. He talked about Jesus divine righteousness, which was beyond human, and his human righteousness, which Wesley described as the imprint of God stamped on his soul. It includes love, reverence, resignation to his Father, humility, meekness, gentleness; love to lost humanity, and every other holy and heavenly temper. And Wesley adds - "He did all things well. In the whole course of his life he did the will of God – He fulfilled all righteousness."

According to the gospels, Jesus never baptized anyone, nor, during his ministry, did any of his followers. And we are never told if the disciples themselves were ever baptized. It was only post resurrection that the Jesus movement began the practice of baptizing newcomers. For Matthew, Christian baptism is not based on Jesus' baptism by John. In Matthew 28, the very last verses of Matthew's gospel, the risen Jesus tells his followers that they are to make disciples of all the world, to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teach everyone to obey what Jesus has taught them. In the post-resurrection communities, baptism was the means by which grace descended upon the newcomer. It was serious business. Baptisms were originally only done at Easter, after three years of preparation culminating in two days of fasting. You had to prove you were worthy and ready to be baptized as a Christian.

In today's world, repentance is very much out of style. For us we have New Year's resolutions. In the last two weeks thousands of Canadians started a new diet or going to the gym. For most it will last a few weeks. That is what passes for repentance in an age of narcissism and hubris. If you try to walk humbly with your God today, you risk being diagnosed with low self esteem and sent for therapy. Yet you and I are still called to live with all righteousness, to live with humility and gentleness, to love lost humanity and to obey the will of God.

The parallels with Jesus time are profound. Righteousness is in short supply. The corporate and nationalistic powers and principalities of our time are no less pervasive than those of the Romans and the landowning elites they protected. We have created and sustained a culture and economy of consumerism and materialism that still relies upon severe economic disparity and even greater environmental destruction. Much of what modern Christianity offers as a response comes in the form of the prosperity gospel and alliance with corporate agendas, or a focus on individual salvation. And today, in Canada and much of Europe, atheism and agnosticism are growing stronger and Christianity is in such decline that we now talk of post-Christendom to describe our time.

But you and I are still here this Sunday morning. We are called to return to the Jordan. That doesn't mean going back to Palestine. It means remembering the story, this story, the story of Jesus, the story of life, death and resurrection and the fulfillment of righteousness. We would all like to see the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. Unfortunately, we don't often get to experience things like that. We do get to see the rise of liberationist theologies, of feminist theologies and a new appreciation of the place of women in the Bible and in the world, the emancipation of gays and lesbians, even in the US military. We get to see the work the church does in community ministries and with our overseas partners, and not just the United Church, but other denominations and faith based organizations.

The good news is that the Holy Spirit is still with us. We who call ourselves progressive Christians are becoming a church in exile. Yet never has the gospel message of repentance been

so important. Western life style may be threatening catastrophic consequences for all of creation. But God continues to sustain and support us. It is not so much that God will solve our problems, rather that God will be with us, sustaining us, bringing joy and fulfillment to our lives, regardless of the outcomes. John and Jesus did not drive out the Romans, they transformed lives, which led to transformed life styles. And that power is still with us, here and now. Accepting that truth, in faith, brings demands and consequences. You don't need me to tell you what they are, we each have our own lives to live. But, as the ones who have been baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, God's Spirit is with us, now and always. Rejoice and be glad of it. Amen.