

A Revealing Baptism

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Preacher: Derek Lamont

[0 : 0 0] So, let's go back to Matthew 3. We started the Gospel of Matthew before the end of the year because we looked at the truths of the incarnation leading up to Christmas. And so now we're on Matthew 3. And we're going to look at that. It's quite a big chapter, but we'll just dip into that passage today. Very often in church, I'll talk about, and if you're part of the church, you'll know that I say this a lot. There's a great difference between knowing Jesus, or knowing about Jesus, and knowing Jesus in our hearts. A great difference.

Intellectual knowledge, factual knowledge is one thing, but knowing Him in order to entrust our lives to Him is different altogether. Becoming someone in a relationship with Jesus is different from simply knowing about the historical character. And I think that difference is something that I want to stress today when we're thinking about this passage. I hope it'll come out in the story as we read it, or as we go through it. The difference about knowing something that's flat on the page and reading through that page, and letting that truth come to life and the Spirit of God to bring it to life. Because actually, when the actual story is, as we go into it, you'll find it's amazingly sensory. There's a whole lot of things in this chapter that appeal to the senses of those who were initially part of the story, or the main characters in the story. It's not just a kind of theological, it's not just a theological treatise in any way, or simply the retelling of a story. It is a hugely living experience as we go through it. And I hope you'll find that, sight, senses, and everything else that goes with that. The first thing I want to mention about the passage is something that's not maybe immediately obvious, is silence. Silence speaks very loudly in this chapter. Because this is the first time that God has spoken to His people for four hundred years. So you've got the Old Testament that finishes with the minor prophets. And there's four hundred years before God sends any prophet, sends anyone to speak to the people. There's silence, heavens are like brass. There's no sound whatsoever coming from heaven. And then all of a sudden in this chapter we've got John the prophet, the greatest of all the prophets, bringing a message, and indeed God Himself speaks at the end of the chapter. So there's silence. But there's also another silence that we've moved from Jesus being born to thirty years later. There's thirty years, well, twenty-nine years of silence.

Maybe eighteen years of silence if you dip into one of the other gospels and learn about what happened to Him when He was in the temple and He was twelve years old. That's the only thing that's spoken of in all of these years. Well, might we think these are the most important years sometimes, don't we? First to thirty? Ah, it's well gone for me, but for lots of you guys, first to thirty, that's the big years. But nothing is mentioned, there's nothing but silence here in Jesus' life. And I think that's interesting for us because silence, spiritually for us, is often such a big problem. We think God isn't listening to us. God isn't interested in us. God's gone away on His holidays. He doesn't care. He isn't answering my prayers. He isn't hearing. My Christian life's rubbish. It's not what I expected it to be. Why is there silence from heaven? I want to learn things, and there's things that are so mysterious that I don't understand, and that God doesn't seem to speak. Sometimes it may be that we are far from Him in the sense that His Old Testament people really were over all these centuries. It may be that we have given place to someone or something else as number one in our lives, and we're not giving Him the honour that is due. And there may be silence because of that. We are far from Him, not the other way around. But it also can be simply His transcendence, that He's revealed things to us. There's other things He's not going to reveal to us. There's some things He's never going to reveal to us, and we simply are asked to trust Him during these times. And isn't that hugely significant?

Trust Him when He is silent. Trust Him when there is no apparent voice from heaven for us. But know that God's silence is always saying something. His seemingly unanswered prayers are never unanswered, but they are simply possibly not the answer we are looking for or not expecting. So

silence is quite loud in this passage actually as we think about it. And there's two main characters in the unfolding drama of the chapter, John the Baptist and Jesus. And these are really, you know, if you had it been played out, these are the two main characters that really are part of the story. You've got John who's a wild prophet. He's unconventional. He's burst onto the scene. He's living in the desert.

[5 : 36] He is striking both in how he lives, the kind of simplicity of his lifestyle, the clothes that he's wearing, the food that he's eating, and the message that he brings. And people are kind of uneasy with John. Oh, they're attracted to him, but he's also kind of a bit of a weird character for them. He's loved or he's loathed. But nonetheless, people are flocking to hear him. Sometimes people like what he says. Sometimes they don't like what he says as we see in this chapter. And I think that's what a lot of people think of Christians, generally. Maybe not, well, maybe it is the clothes we wear sometimes. But I think sometimes there's a like or a low that reality that we experience as Christians. We, how we live and what we believe attracts some, but it repels others. We must be ready for that. We must recognize that as a reality for us. So you've got John there. And the great thing about John is his message challenges the status quo of everyone who listens to him. And I hope that, I hope that's the case every time you come to God's word and also every time you come to church. It's not good if church is somewhere where you're really happy and comfortable all the time. I don't think, I don't think it should be miserable. I think we should be encouraging one another, certainly. But it should be a place where the status quo of my life and your life is being rattled and being considered. So you are convicted and convinced and challenged by the living word of God. And that the status quo of our lives is not a good place to be. We want to be pushed and pulled and cajoled and encouraged and hugged and brought into a closer relationship with Jesus. So John and his message and the gospel is going to be like that for us sometime. But then we have Jesus in the story. And Jesus is being presented here as he comes in his public ministry as a king like no other. John says the kingdom of God is at hand. And basically this is the coming Messiah. This is the coming king, poor Harry. He said a hard week, hasn't he, this week. The weight of expectation on

Harry being a royal and being a royal with Meg and his wife and finding a role and significance in the modern world that it's really turned their life upside down. They don't know what it takes, what it means and what's involved in it for them. I've got great sympathy for that. But here is Jesus who knows exactly why he's come. Even at this point, he's the king of kings. And he's a king like no other. And he has come for every single human being.

A king who now we know has invisible rule and unlimited power, who's mysterious but also revealed. So we've got John and we've got Jesus. And Jesus will unpack a little bit about what Jesus, who Jesus is and what is spoken about him here. He's going to be the way John says through the prophet Isaiah, the voice of one coming, crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord and make his path straight. This was an Old Testament image where the great kings, Solomon and David, when they went anywhere out of their palace, maybe they went to a different part of the country, then the highway would be prepared for them so that their journey was comfortable. The rough places would be made plain. The rugged places smooth so that this was the king coming. There would be a highway for the king, a way being prepared.

It's a bit like today where the queen thinks that everything in front of her smells of fresh paint because there's always someone painting. Just in front of her. Everything's fresh and new when the queen is coming. And when the queen is coming, people prepare the way. It's not exactly the same but there's the same kind of idea. The barriers would be removed. The blockages would be taken away and the king's way would be made straight.

And John is preparing the way for the way because Jesus is the way. And he is introducing the kingdom of heaven. And Jesus went on to teach, of course, that the kingdom of heaven was not a physical kingdom. It was primarily a change of rule in our heart. The kingdom of God, he says in Luke 17.20, is within you. So he is introducing himself as the king who rules, who judges, and who decides what's right and wrong, and who wants the Lordship of our lives. And this king, who's like no other, he comes and John is preparing the way for him. And here he gets baptized. John gets, Jesus gets baptized. This is part of the preparation. This is part of the way that's being prepared. Can we look at that for a moment? There's a voice from heaven when Jesus is to get baptized. This is my beloved son and whom I'm well pleased. So not only has John spoken as a prophet and brings a message from God, but God, we don't know who hears this. It's recorded for us, maybe it

was only

[11:05] Jesus that heard it, maybe it was all the people around him, it was just Jesus and John. But we know that God spoke and spoke audibly to Jesus as he was baptized. Now think of these words, this is my son whom I love. With him I am well pleased. This is my beloved son. With him I am well pleased. Now that's either fake news or we take the whole package.

And we accept that this is a trinitarian declaration of intent. The Father, the Holy Spirit comes in the person of the dove, in the form of a dove and the son. And it's a declaration of intent of what God has planned from heaven for humanity. This is my beloved son with whom I'm well pleased. It's a hugely significant statement. It's cosmic truth.

If we take Jesus seriously and if we take ourselves seriously and if we take the message of the Bible seriously, it's cosmic truth. And there's a consequence of God the Father saying to God the Son, this is my beloved son and I'm well pleased with him. We'll maybe unpack it a little bit. Because that's his verdict. That's the verdict from heaven to earth. This divinely orchestrated and originated act of love where Jesus is lovingly sent, the Holy Spirit in love descends and the Son in love is deemed to become the perfect substitute for grubby human beings like you and me. God is already well pleased with Jesus and his work. And that is the best news that there has ever, that's the best declaration that has ever been made. Because being pleased with Jesus, God the Father being pleased with Jesus resounds through the centuries and includes all of Jesus' life and death and resurrection.

And if we grasp the consequences of that statement, then your life will never be the same again. You may be in a Christian for many years, but if we grasp the consequences of that of God, the Father being pleased with God the Son, it will transform our lives more than it has done up to this point. So there's a voice from heaven and a verdict from heaven.

Then there's a declaration from Jesus himself because he regards his baptism as something that had to be done. John comes to him and says, what? Me baptize you? Surely not. Surely it should be the other way around. Jesus answers it, let it be so now for thus it is fitting, it's proper for us to fulfill all righteousness. It was a proper thing for Jesus to do because he was fulfilling the righteous demands of God's laws of love to be baptized. What do I mean by that? He didn't need cleansed, did he? Baptism was all about cleansing and repentance.

[14:22] He didn't need to repent, did he? John the Baptist was talking about repent for the kingdom of God is at hand. He didn't need to repent. He didn't need to turn round. He didn't need cleansing. John said as much, you don't need baptize, it's me that needs baptize by you. And the father verified it. Didn't he when he said that I'm well pleased with you? He didn't need cleansed, he didn't need baptize. Why was Jesus then being baptized?

Because he's standing in our place. He's been baptized as a representative of broken, fallen and unclean humanity so that he can offer his standing with God to us so that we can be well pleasing to the Father. This is why he's such an unusual king, such a radical king because he has come not to receive glory but he's come to be banished and he's come to experience poverty and he's come to receive the... take on him the wrath of God for our sins. So there's a forward element to this early baptismal act that speaks of God's solution to everything that's wrong with my heart and your heart. Everything that's wrong with us desperately fractured and ruptured world. It says if we surrender to Jesus Christ and to His salvation, His righteousness and the pleasure that God finds in Him becomes ours as He takes our wrath, the wrath due to us and the sin that separates us from the living

God. Now, Jesus' baptism was misunderstood. It's still misunderstood and many people have different things to say about it but that's the reality of truth and it's also the reality of Jesus. He's often open to misunderstanding and it's significant for us always to be praying for light and to seek to worship Him as He reveals Himself as God and as Savior.

Now just before we come to the last point, I just have a quick sidebar here about the visual aspect of the story which is steeped in Old Testament drama and we sometimes forget that. We need to remember Jesus is an Old Testament believer and so is John and they brought up knowing the Old Testament back to front and the history and the drama and the events and the truth of the Old Testament and so this event of Matthew 3 would have had huge significance for them as it was played out. Things that we kind of maybe don't think about too much, the whole fact that it's around the River Jordan and around water would have been greatly significant because Jesus was to offer Himself as living water and the river of life. Jeremiah 17 which we were looking at the living water

which the roots are to be directed towards but there's also the waters of judgment, the waters of judgment of Noah's day which were really significant in Old Testament terms and linked then to the dove. So we've got a dove that is Old Testament symbolism from the time of Noah speaking of new life and peace through the reality of justice met and salvation offered, a recreation pointing to what Christ was to achieve, going to plunge into the waters of God's judgment who's going to be redeemed, resurrected as the Savior, the fulfillment of lots of types and images and prophecies, the desert. John coming out of the desert, desert, big, big images for the Old Testament person, a barrenness of not being in the land of flowing with milk and honey but being separated from God, a lack of fruitfulness, isolation and danger, wandering in the desert and out of this comes a message of hope and returning and salvation and vital to see these images in our own understanding as well, of desert times, of drought, times of drought we needn't be afraid as we are connected to the living God because we find from Him is our source of fruitfulness. The darkest experiences can come the light of life. And then the character of John himself linking with Elijah, everyone would have made that connection, the clothes, the food, the message, the prophecies all linking in, dress, code and diet. That would have been powerful for Jesus. And then Jesus himself as the focus of prophecy, the Lord, the Messiah who was coming into the flesh, who surely be plunged into these waters himself in baptism to rise to face the desert himself, went into the desert for 40 days of temptation with the sound of divine words echoing in his ears.

It's kind of a sensory overload this passage. Meh, we sit in 21st century Edinburgh, doesn't seem like that, does it? But I think it would be bursting with energy and with sensory reality.

[19:53] And I do think that in our tradition especially we've kind of underplayed that whole element of sensory reality to our faith and the reality of being saved, body and soul. We're very intellectual, we're very cerebral. Nothing wrong with being cerebral unless you're not like me. But it's both, isn't it? It's both and. Yes, it's a renewing of our mind of course, but a renewing of our mind that changes all that we are in our physicality and our being in our pleasures and our joys and the things that, how God speaks to us and how real He is to us. The sensory reality of belonging to God, often we are limiting Him to a tiny corner of our brains that we dust down on a Sunday morning for an hour and then we leave Him for the rest of our sensual week without Him.

So let's finish with the dynamic spiritual message that comes through this passage from the message of John that's linked to the message of Jesus and to the gospel and to our lives therefore. The first, you don't want to hear. The first is that there's a judgment day.

But verse 7, when He saw, this is John, many of the Pharisees and Sadducees, he's coming to His baptism, He said to them, You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. Nobody wants to hear that. Nice bright Sunday morning. No one wants to hear about the wrath to come. But everyone wants justice to be done, don't they? We all want justice. Nobody wants wrath, but we all want justice. We all hope somewhere down the line that all the wrongs will be put right. We just don't want ourselves to be part of the wrongs. Everyone else, we want to be made right with us, but we don't want to be part of the guilty. And that's, we want that day of reckoning on our own terms, and that's a challenge, isn't it? Because the cross, the wrath to come is initially the work of God in the cross, that His wrath is poured out on His Son as the great judge of all judging, internally as it were sins, because it's the only way that we can live. The outpouring of divine wrath on the divine Son. So the cross is saying the wrath is real, and the judgment of God, in all its perfection and justice, remember, we have a wrong understanding of wrath and anger and stuff that make it very capricious, it's not like that at all.

But the just judgment of God is either on Jesus or it remains on us. That's the stark reality of the message of what John is saying about the work of Jesus, and it's either real and sensory and true, or we just ditch it. And if we ditch that, let's ditch the rest of it all and just be moralists, because that's all that's left really. And that's okay if you want that. But don't pretend, well it's not okay, but at least it's honest.

And let's be honest, it's either a radical transformation of our lives, it's either that recognition that the state of school gets really knocked on its head when we're Christians, every day, every time we come to Him. You know, I don't care if we've been Christians for a long time, it should be the same. It should be this, there should be this reality and this munis and this freshness every time we come to God, that He disrupts our state as co, and our contentment sometimes with a different contentment. So it's a judgment day and therefore the second message, this dynamic spiritual message here is the importance of coming back to God. That's what He begins with, repent for the

kingdom of heaven is at hand. It's a, Thomas mentioned it last Sunday night about repentance, it's a radical changing of our minds, which therefore involves our lives. You know, and I guess sometimes I think what we think in Christian, that was John the Baptist, that's an Old Testament message and then Jesus comes and it's a message of love. Okay, that's fine. But it's both and, isn't it? Repent is the first recorded words of John, it's the first recorded words of public words in ministry of Jesus, it's the first recorded words of the disciples,

[24 : 39] I've got all the references for that, I'll not give you them just now. It's the first reported words of Jesus to the disciples after the resurrection, it's the first message of the Diapentecost sermon. So it remains significant important when things come first in the Bible, it usually means they're significant and important, kind of an important concept.

Because He wants us to be turning towards home, that's what repentance is, it's turning towards our maker, it's turning towards our redeemer, it's turning towards the one who gives us life, reconciled to God. And everything then comes from that, a mindset that involves our life and our deeds. And John's frustration with the religious people of the day was that they didn't have fruit in bearing with repentance. And interestingly, in Luke 3, he talks, they ask him about what that fruit is. And he talks about generosity and integrity and contentment.

Content with what we have, a generosity because of grace and an integrity because we have been honest with the living God. The fruit of repentance is these things, great stuff from John, great sermon that. John's, not mine. And so we see that mere religion will never cut it, don't we? Verse 9, and you presume to say, we have Abraham as our father? He says, look, God can raise up these stones here to be sons of Abraham. So basically they were trusting in their background, their religiosity, their privileges as religious believers. And he says, mere religion will never cut it. We need, and mere intellectual knowledge will never cut it. We need a change of heart and life. And that can only come from crying out to the living God, recognizing our deep need and the humble trust and following

Jesus. And that will ruin your life. I'm telling you, it will ruin your life. It will ruin at least your self-made plans and the comfort and the ease of living apart from God. But it's a great ruination. It's a ruination that builds and gives life and hope. And therefore we need John's baptism. Not just the baptism of repentance that John was preparing, but the baptism of Jesus, which John spoke about, was saying, he will baptize you. In verse 11, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. When a fork is in his hand and he will clear the threshing floor and gather his feet into the burn, but the chaff, he will burn with unquenchable fire. He's not just talking about the sacrament here. He's pointing to what the sacrament symbolizes, the actual cleansing work of Jesus Christ in our hearts. And that's the work of the Holy Spirit in us and the fire of cleansing that He brings to us, that recognition of God's verdict and our need for the Holy Spirit. So that immediately reminds us that Christianity is not just a kind of religious option. It's not just a way of life. It's a movement from death to life. It's a supernatural work of God that we need. We can make it on our own. He needs to save us and we need to cry out to Him for salvation because He says we're dead and He only can bring from death life. There's an uncleanness, a guilt and a stain. And this life is shadowy. It's sensory and it's great.

[28 : 34] I love the senses. I was at a fantastic music concert last night and it was quite worshipful... The guys who are with me might not agree, but I found it quite worshipful just because of the gifts that we enjoy and the senses that are overwhelmed by the beauty of music.

I have no idea where I was going with that. Yeah, because ultimately even these things are just shadows pointing to the reality that's found in Christ, the reality of His redeeming and redeeming of all things so that even the beautiful things we enjoy now are only a shadow of the beauty that we can't even imagine He has prepared for those who love Him in this life and in the life to come. You are so loved and He is so willing. You are so loved and He is so willing. May it be that we mimic Him this year as Christians in the generosity and in the integrity and in the contentment we have and that we are encouragers. I really want to stress that intentional encouragement. Loneliness, isolation, battles, spiritual depression, physical depression, circumstantial difficulties, battles, doubts, fears, we all have them at different levels. But let's not come into St. Columbus week after week as islands and let's not come thinking no one else understands what I'm going through and I have no time for them or not let's look, come into St. Columbus in our city groups or in our communities and criticise and condemn and find fault. But let's be encouragers as the day approaches.

Now, there are some words that I wanted to finish with in John chapter 5. I'm not sure if the AV team got that or not. Oh, you did. Brilliant. So Jesus later on in recording one of the other Gospels, I want to give the last word to Him. Of course, truly, truly, verily, verily, absolutely, truly. When He said that, He wanted to stress the emphasis on how important it was. I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes Him who sent me has eternal life.

He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life. That's kind of where we are with the Gospel. That's what it is and that's what Jesus was being prepared for in baptism. I really hope that it may be something that utterly and radically changes your life today if you're not a Christian and even if you are a Christian to remember the significance and the love and the grace of Jesus. Let's pray. Father God, help us to know and understand who you are. Forgive us when we treat you like some insignificant bit player in the world or in our lives, or when we grumble without at least grumbling to you. Forgive us when we grumble away from you. Forgive us for not taking our questions to you. Forgive us when we assume that your silence means something other than what it may be. May we ask for why the silence is important in our lives and what it means. And above all, help us to understand the amazing purpose and sovereign plan of God revealed right through the Old

Testament, right through all of what happened with water and with doves and with deserts and with kings and with prophets. All pointing towards the coming of Jesus, this moment when God would say, this is my beloved Son whom I love, well pleased with Him. And may we know that that peace and that relationship of love is and can be ours through trusting in what Jesus has done on our behalf as He took the estrangement and the darkness and the separation of God on the cross. We ask that you would transform our day and our week and our lives in the light of that all the time. It's a miracle. And we need a miracle because it seems impossible to do. Amen.