

12 January 2025

Isaiah 43:1-7  
Acts 8:14-17  
Luke 3:15-17; 21-22

The little gravel road on the outskirts of the village was all the world the small group of urchins had known. In the winter they played in the dirty water of its potholes; in the summer they bounced their wooden hoops over the hardened ruts left by horse-drawn carts; in autumn they kicked showers of dead leaves over one another; in spring they shied stones at passing rabbits.

On one side of the road stood their ramshackle houses; on the other ran a thick hedge. The story whispered among the children was that beyond the hedge there were grand houses; but as they had never seen such places the children were not inclined to believe the tales. At the end of the road was a small orchard, and it was in this orchard that the seven children now stood, shuffling their feet, hesitant with one another.

You see, a couple of weeks earlier the children had raided the orchard, gorging themselves on the tempting sweet fruit. They had known it would be wrong to do so, they had known that they would be found out and that they would get into trouble for it, but somehow they found themselves doing it anyway. They could not remember who had first had the idea; they could not remember whether they had felt hungry, or whether it was just a dare or what ... but in any case it had happened. Their punishment, the guilt they each felt, and their blaming of one another had fractured their friendship.

After what seemed like an eternity of two weeks, here they were – together again, but uncertain as to how to reforge the friendship that had bound them before.

Then one of them, Johnny, had any idea: they should each spit on their hand and shake hands with one another. The others were surprised, and one or two shook their heads. This was the ritual they used when someone new

moved into the street and needed to be initiated into their little band. The two that shook their heads couldn't see the point – after all, they weren't strangers. But wise Johnny pointed out that they had all become *like* strangers to one another, so it seemed like just the right thing to do – like starting their friendship over again.

And so they stood in a line, and Johnny stood in front of the first one in the line, Sally. He spat in his hand, and she in hers, and they shook hands solemnly. Johnny worked his way along the line, shaking hands with each in turn.

After he had shaken hands with all six, Johnny took his place at the end of the line, and Sally started to work her way along. And so it went, until all seven had been along the line of his or her fellows.

Just as they finished, Johnny looked up and saw another boy coming towards them from across the road near the hedge. He was not known to them, but he looked just like them – torn clothes, no shoes, grubby face. He joined the line and so Johnny led the way, spitting in his hand and shaking the hand of the newcomer. One by one the others followed suit.

Then a voice called through the hedge. “Son! What on earth do you think you are doing? Get away from those dirty children and come back here where you belong!”

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John went into the countryside around the Jordan River, urging people to repent, to turn back towards God.

John symbolised this turning back, this repentance, in baptism; a ritual cleansing in the River Jordan. It was a sign of acceptance of John's message, a sign of a turn to God's ways, and a getting ready for God's coming kingdom in Jesus Christ and the presence of God's Holy Spirit.

But John's choice of symbolic action for this was surprising. Jews practiced baptism, but it was reserved for Gentile converts to Judaism. It was a symbol of washing away pagan impurity so that they could be received into the Jewish faith. However, those born to Jewish parents were automatically accepted in the Jewish faith. To ask Jews to submit to their proselyte baptism was to say that their birth meant nothing. It is like Johnny in my story suggesting that the way to be reconciled is to submit to the rite that strangers have to go through in order to be accepted.

This is precisely John's point. One can't rely upon birth; *one must live in accordance with what one professes to be.*

And then along comes Jesus:

When all the people were being baptised, Jesus was baptised too. And as he was praying, heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: "You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." (Luke 3:21-22)

Epiphany means revelation, and a good question to ask of the Gospel readings during this season, is 'What is revealed about Jesus in this?' So, what is revealed about Jesus in the event of his baptism by John? I want to note three things:

First, the opening of heaven, descent of the Holy Spirit, and voice from heaven reveal where Jesus comes from. It's like the voice from coming from beyond the hedge in my story – despite the new boy's scruffy appearance like them, the other children hearing that voice know immediately where the boy comes from: one of the grand houses of their stories.

Second, Jesus' participation in John's rite of baptism shows the extent of his willingness to identify with humankind. He comes from that grand and pristine world beyond the hedge, but will participate in the rite of belonging as one of the urchins.

Third, unlike the parental voice from over the hedge, God approves – “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” The affirmation comes firstly from the simple fact of who Jesus is – “You are my Son, whom I love” – and secondly from the fact that what Jesus is doing here is part of the working out of God’s plan – “With you I am well pleased.”

God plan is for the restoration of right relationship with humankind. The relationship of love and obedient submission which God created was fractured when humankind rebelled. The work God sent Jesus to do was to restore that relationship. And at the beginning of that work, here he was submitting to John’s rite of baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus was without sin so had no need to take part in this rite.

But in Jesus God demonstrates that he is willing to get his hands dirty. Like the lad from the grand house taking his place alongside the urchins, in Jesus God lives in our midst, participates in all our humanness, in our work, our play, our relationships, our hopes, dreams, disappointments, suffering.

God’s way of working is in and through humankind. He works through *all* of our humanness; he wants us to love him with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.

It is said that people can be categorised into two types: there are those that categorise everything into two different types and those who don’t! Certainly it is true that we tend to be a bit calculating. We look at a statement like “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your mind, all your soul, and all your strength” and we do a bit of mental calculus – “Now which bit of me is left out here; which part of me does not have to love God entirely?”

But this is wrong. It is wrong on two counts:

- ❖ First, because the very calculation, the very seeking after a gap in the required devotedness to God, displays a lack of submission to God.
- ❖ And second, it is wrong because in Biblical thought heart, mind, soul, and strength are not different *parts* of the human being, but are just different

ways of thinking about the *whole person* in his or her relationship with God.

The force of this 'Love the Lord your God' passage is that our fundamental loyalty is to be to God.

And, I would submit, if our fundamental loyalty is to be to God, then this should show up in *every* aspect of our lives.

But of course this is not our normal state. We continue to struggle with divided loyalties. We can readily imagine that the children in my story were not automatically and permanently transformed in their relationships by going through their rite of spitting on their hands. It marked an important milestone of forgiveness and reconciliation, but that reconciliation would have to be continually worked at and made real in their day to day life in the days and weeks and months that followed.

In the same way, our own milestones in the faith are not graduations; we still have to live into the reality they signify.

We continue to struggle with divided loyalties. But we are being changed. God works in our humanness, gradually transforming each of us into the fullness of the potential suggested in our conversion and baptism.

God came to earth as a child, and infiltrated human society so that he might transform it. The fullness of that transformation is being worked out through us, Christ's body in the world, children of the Most High God. And as we live this out, may we each too hear his affirmation of *us* – "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased."

Amen.