

Actions of Jesus: Baptism of Jesus: Matthew 3:1-3, 13-17

Leader's reflection

After Matthew's focus on the birth of Jesus, we jump to Jesus as an adult, approaching the river Jordan and his cousin, John the Baptist. This is not an accident, as in the Jewish Rabbinic tradition, it was at around the age of 30 that a man would transition from being a student to being a rabbi, and would become a teacher of a group of disciples he selected as his followers.

Jesus' baptism throws up some awkwardness for us, and for the early readers. Within the Jewish tradition baptism, or *Tvilah*, was an act undertaken by:

1. A person who needed restoring to ritual purity after become impure, such as through contact with a corpse or;
2. A convert to Judaism, marking a change in their status from gentile to Jew.

It was undertaken in a natural source of water, hence John's use of the river Jordan as his location to baptise.

It is the first use of *Tvilah* that John was performing, and this is where the awkward problems arise regarding Jesus. If he was truly sinless, why did he undertake baptism to restore ritual purity? The answer to these questions can be found if we look at Jesus' words in v15. 'This is the way for us to fulfil all righteousness.' The words 'fulfil righteousness' here could be referring to Old Testament prophecies, such as Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1, which both show the Messiah being marked out as the Son of God.

Another answer to the awkwardness is that Jesus is showing us the best way to be people, the way which brings us in line with God's plan for us. In going through baptism, He is showing that the submission of ourselves to God and the forgiveness of sins, we are moving closer to finding our place in creation as image bearers of God.



There is a further sub-text going on here. As mentioned earlier, around the age of 30 was when a student would make the move to being a teacher and taking on their own disciples.

As part of this transition, they would be blessed and endorsed by two experienced Rabbi's. This would act as a safeguard on the interpretation of scripture, as, if a new rabbi's interpretations were too extreme, they would struggle to find two rabbi's to endorse them. At the baptism of Jesus, we see this endorsement, coming from John the Baptist, and, most importantly, from God Himself.

This symbolism would not have been lost on early readers of the text. Coming from a Jewish background they would have seen that this marked Jesus out as a rabbi, as blessed by God, and shown his role re-interpreting the scriptures for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

This would have given Jesus' teaching a weight and credibility they may not otherwise have had to a Jewish audience.

We can see then that beyond the surface reading of the baptism of Jesus, there is a depth of meaning that passes us by. This deeper meaning can show us more about who Jesus was, and how the pattern of His ministry would be shaped by the culture He was living and ministering in.

But perhaps the greatest thing we can take from this is that one of the key purposes of Jesus' life was to show us the best way to be people, the best way to be image bearers of God. In attempting to do this, we need to submit ourselves to God, and seek out His purpose for our lives.

Aim

To uncover some of the symbolism of Jesus' baptism, and to show why baptism is an important sign of choosing God.

Main points to cover

1. Jesus didn't need to be baptised, but was baptised us to show us how important it was.
2. Baptism is an important part of the Christian faith.
3. Baptism shows that we want to be a part of God's plan for the world,

Focus On

Jesus didn't need to be baptised, but was showing us the best way to be image bearers of God.



Activity ideas

What is baptism? To get a feel for where the young people are and what they know about baptism already, spend some time mind-mapping baptism and what they think it means. At this point don't correct anything they get wrong/misunderstand, but just get a feel for what they think. If there are misunderstandings make sure that you go back to them even if it is extra to the rest of the session.

Symbolism: There is a significant amount of symbolism to take apart in this story. As part of teaching the young people how to decode some of the symbols of the Bible, it is important to spend some time doing this with them. Pick out the symbols in the story and put them on individual pieces of paper. Split the young people into groups and give each group a symbol (below) to explore. Writing down what they think it represents and where else they know it appears in the Bible.

Water- Natural flowing water was an important part of baptism, as it showed reliance on creation rather than a man-made water source. It is also, more obviously, a cleaner and would symbolise being cleaned. Baptism in a natural source is therefore a sign of being cleaned by something God provides.

Spirit of God descending like a dove- There are two callbacks here to Old Testament stories. The first is the story of Creation, and the Spirit of God hovering over the water. Here the Spirit hovers over Jesus, as a sign of him as the new way that God was bringing into the world. The second is the dove; a dove was released from the Ark by Noah, and didn't return. This was a sign that new land had been uncovered, and so the dove here shows that Jesus is the hope of a new way of following God.

Voice from heaven- A much more obvious symbolism, this is a callback to the exodus, and God speaking with Moses. Here it clearly shows Jesus is in contact with God in a way that was reserved for those specially chosen in the Old Testament. The words also signify to us that Jesus is greater than those chosen in the Old Testament.

Why was Jesus baptised? Look at verse 13-14, and get the young people to take apart what John says here. Why does he try to stop Jesus baptising him? Why does he say that Jesus should be baptising him? And what does Jesus' response tell us? Jesus was baptised to show us how important it is for us to say that God knows best. We can easily ignore what God says while still believing in Him, but by being baptised we are publicly saying that God knows a better way for us. Ask the young people to think if there are parts of their lives where they are saying they know better than God.



Actions of Jesus: Jesus is tempted in the wilderness: Matthew 4:1-11

Leader's reflection

In a similar vein to the previous story of Jesus' Baptism, there is a lot going on beneath the surface in this reading. This doesn't mean that a surface reading of this story is worthless, far from it. But it means that again, if we dig a little deeper, we can discover more about Jesus' purpose, and this can enrich our own walk of faith.

However, we need to check some of our assumptions when we read stories about Jesus. Often our first reaction to Jesus' actions and words can be to say, 'Well, He was the Son of God, of course He could do that'. In doing this we can jump straight past some of the most important things we can learn from the life of Jesus, and what it means for our own lives. The Temptation of Jesus is one of those stories. When we look at the temptations, we can easily say, 'Of course He could resist them, He is the Son of God.' But if instead we focus on Jesus' humanity, it gives hope to all of us when faced with temptation.

The three temptations of Jesus are;

1. Earthly comfort (food),
2. Asking God to prove Himself,
3. Power over others through idolatry.

Each of these temptations is a callback to the Old Testament, and the people of Israel in the wilderness;

1. In Exodus 16, the people are tested by hunger, and complain to God that He has left them to starve.
2. In Exodus 17 and Deuteronomy 6, the people test God to provide them with something to prove He is worthy of being followed.
3. In Exodus 32, the people become idolatrous, and create their own god to worship, and who they believe will give them power.



The contrast here between the actions of the people as disobedient children of God, and Jesus as the obedient Son of God, demonstrates that Jesus is here to show us how to be image bearers of God.

At each of these temptations, Satan does something very specific. He misquotes scripture, to persuade Jesus that He would be doing the right thing in giving in. Each time Jesus' response starts with, 'It is written...' Jesus' knowledge of the Word allows Him to stay close to God, and to face down the temptation. If we read this with Jesus' God-ness forefront in our minds, it has little further application for our own lives beyond reminding us how good Jesus is. But if we read it with Jesus' humanity, it instead offers us two things.

First, it shows us that it is possible for us to resist temptation by finding our refuge in God. I firmly believe that Jesus could have said yes at any point to these temptations, otherwise the temptations are meaningless. Jesus shows us, in line with 1 Corinthians 10:13, that it is possible to live a life in line with the teachings of God. Secondly, it shows us that Jesus has experienced life as we know it, with its trials and temptations. God doesn't understand us because He is God, and understands all things. He understands us because He has been one of us. He doesn't just understand, He empathises.

This reading is a key one in our understanding of our own walk with God. Often we believe that we are going to fail in our attempts to live for God but Jesus shows us it is possible to live for God. He shows us a better way to be human, one that puts God first and others before ourselves. And in doing so, we become more closely the people God intended us to be.



Aim	To show that temptation can distort our view of God, that we can resist it, and that the Bible can help us see clearly what God wants for us.
Main points to cover	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Jesus shows us that it is possible to resist temptation. 5. Jesus shows that God knows a better way for us to live. 6. The Bible can help us to know what God's plan is for us.
Focus On	The use of scripture throughout to tempt and to resist temptation.

Activity ideas

Ask the young people to go through the reading and count how many times the Old Testament is used. Remind them they are looking for uses of 'it is written' or 'it is said'. They should get to 6; 3 for Satan and 3 for Jesus. Ask them what it means that Satan uses scripture to tempt Jesus, (he is taking scripture out of context to give himself credibility he doesn't have), and what it means for Jesus to use scripture back, (he is using it in the way it was intended, and understands the intention behind it).

Could Jesus have said yes? Ask the young people if they think that Jesus could have given in to the temptations. If yes, what does that tell us, and if no, what does that tell us? Why is it important that he could say yes?

Video: If possible show this video and ask the young people what their thoughts are afterwards. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O5bfXGNMY9c>

Often temptation is painted as something that we just need to give in to. The world's idea of, 'naughty but nice', shows us that it is good to give in to temptation, but even in Church we talk far more about being forgiven for giving in than resisting. Have the young people read 1 Corinthians 10:13. What does it tell us about our attitude to temptation compared to the Bible's attitude to temptation. Briefly talk about how Jesus shows us the best way to be human, and to put God first. Have some time set aside for prayer with the young people to give them a chance to talk to God about the things they are tempted by, and asking God to help them put Him before them.



Actions of Jesus: Jesus sends out the disciples: Matthew 10:1-20

Leader's reflection

In sending out the twelve to do the work of the Kingdom, Jesus is sending an important message, not just the twelve, but also to later believers. The message being 'This doesn't end with me.' If Jesus had never selected disciples, never taught them, and never sent them out, it would have been incredibly easy for the early Christians to say that they needed to do nothing. But because He did call students to learn from Him, because He did send them out, the message is clearly that the bringing of God's kingdom doesn't end with Jesus.

This is an incredibly important, as well as an incredibly powerful, message for us today. God invites us to be a part of His mission, He allows us to have a key role in His work. But it isn't going to be easy.

First Jesus gives his disciples the same authority He was given by His Father, and by extension that authority is given to us. He then sends them only to the people of Israel. This reminds us that the Messiah came first for the lost sheep of Israel, if we lose sight of this, we can lose sight of the privilege we have been offered by the extension of the invitation to the gentiles.

What follows is a list of specific instructions as to how to behave while they are out and about.

However, what I would like to focus on most are the words found in verse 16, 'I'm sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as serpents and as harmless as doves.' Why does this matter? Why is it significant? Because it shows how the followers of Jesus are to be different from those around them. They are called to live by different values.



The disciples would be rejected by certain people who were not willing to hear about the Kingdom of God, the early church would have read these words and known the truth of them in their lives. They would have been rejected by the people around them, mistreated by those in authority.

In calling them to be as shrewd as serpents, Jesus is reminding his followers not to be naive, to understand the motives of those standing against them. To remember that people around them would wish them harm. But in also calling them to be as harmless as doves, he is instructing them not to retaliate, that understanding why people are acting against you does not give you the right to act like that against them in turn.

This would be lived out in the lives of many of the early martyrs. Of the twelve sent out here, only one would die a natural death; Stephen preached the Gospel to men he knew wanted him dead; Paul submitted to Roman authority even though he knew it could end badly. Yet they and many others never sought to pay like for like, they lived to a different standard, as we are called to do.

Aim

To show that Jesus trusts us to get on with the job he gives us, but that we are not to live to the same standard as everyone else.

Main points to cover

1. Jesus gives all his followers authority to be kingdom bringers
2. Jesus knows it is going to be hard, but gives us tools and capacity to do the best we can
3. Jesus expects us to live by different standards to the ones we will encounter in our mission

Focus On

What are those different standards?



Activity ideas

Ask the young people to read through the verses in groups, and pick out bits that stand out to them, don't make sense, or that they find encouraging. Come back together and look at some of the bits they have picked out. Why have they picked them out and are there any bits they have all picked out?

Shrewd as serpents, harmless as doves. What do the young people think this means? Split the young people into two groups and give them each one of the metaphors. Have them to mind map what they think it means and then come back together to discuss what they have each said. Explain that it means we are to know why other people may work against us (shrewd as servants), but not to react in the same way, (harmless as doves). Ask them why this might be a hard thing to do.

By other standards: If we are to be harmless as doves, it means we are supposed to do things differently. What are we supposed to base this way of doing things on? Ask the young people to look at Matthew 5:43-48. What does that tell us about how we should treat the people around us? Can we do it by ourselves? Finish by having the young people name the people they struggle to act towards in this way, and pray with the young people, that God would help them to learn to live by this different standard.

Actions of Jesus: Jesus comforts John the Baptist: Matthew 11:1-18

Leader's reflection

Doubt is something that we can be very uncomfortable with. It can be seen as weakness, as a struggle, as us losing our way. And yet the Bible is full of people who doubted: many of the Psalms are questioning where God is in their time of suffering; Job is an entire book exploring where God is when we suffer and doubt; Lamentations asks again and again how God can allow things to happen. Doubt is not the opposite of faith, it is an important part of the journey of faith.

This story is one that we should remember whenever we come to talk about doubt. John has been thrown in prison, due to a less than good relationship with Herod's wife. We can imagine how things seem from his point of view. He baptised the man who he believed was the Son of God, who would bring about the rule and reign of God on earth.

And what has happened since? What change has been made? It seems like nothing, and so when he is thrown in prison, he begins to doubt what he has believed all his life.

And so he asks for reassurance, for proof that he wasn't wrong. He sends disciples to ask Jesus outright if He is the One.

Jesus doesn't give a straight answer. Instead He tells the disciples, 'Report to John what you see and hear: The blind see, the lame walk, those with skin diseased are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor are told the good news.' This can seem a harsh answer, basically telling John to draw his own conclusions. But it is also a fantastic answer, which would give John more reassurance from real evidence related to Scripture.

In his answer, Jesus is referring to Old Testament prophecies about what the Messiah was going to do. Two specific examples are for Isaiah, 29:18-19, and 35:5-6, but more generally He was referring to the coming of the Kingdom of God, of the world being put right. By doing this, He is not merely saying to John, 'Yes, it's ok, you were right to believe what you believe.', but instead is saying something far deeper about the purpose of the Messiah in the world.

In doing this, Jesus is showing a different attitude to doubt to the one we often think of. Often our first response to doubt is to argue it away, to fight back against it with facts and figures. Jesus instead is listening to where the doubt comes from; John is in a place of darkness, fear and worry. He is questioning his most heartfelt beliefs. Jesus' response shows His understanding of how John is feeling.

What can we learn from this? That doubt is fine, it is a normal part of faith. But that when we approach those who are doubting, our first answer should not be to throw all of our reasoned and well thought through arguments at them. Instead it should be to ask, why? Why do you feel like that? What has caused you to ask these questions? Then we can walk with those who doubt, and help them not to overcome doubt, but to walk through it and emerge from the other side having learnt more of who God is, rather than learning facts about Him.

Aim

To show that doubting is a normal part of faith, and can happen to all people when they go through hard times.

Main points to cover

1. John the Baptist was chosen by God to do something special, but also reacted like a normal person when things seemed to be going wrong.
2. Jesus doesn't just tell him why he is wrong, but shows him something to reassure him instead.
3. Worrying and doubting is something that happens to all of us.

Focus On

What Jesus has to say about John the Baptist.



Activity ideas

Opposites: Play a simple word game of opposites, starting with obvious things and moving into less obvious things, for example start with left (right) and move towards things like orange (?), asking why for each thing. End up by saying Doubt and see what the young people say. If they say Faith, ask them why that is the opposite of doubt. Explain that today we are looking at doubt, and why it is an important element of faith.

John the Baptist- What words come to mind when the young people think about John the Baptist? What is their impression of what he was like? Explore that before looking at the reading for today's session. Once you have some words, read through the story together and see what they think of John the Baptist after this, what words come to mind? Explore what had changed for John during this time, and why he might be wondering what was going on and whether Jesus really was the Messiah.

When we doubt... A real problem with doubt is seeing it as the opposite of faith. Instead it should be something that helps us build faith, because it makes us think and explore things we wouldn't think about if we didn't doubt. Give time for the young people to talk about things they doubt about faith and about God, but don't try and give answers. Instead encourage them to talk to each other and to other Christians about these doubts, so that we can help each other work things out together.

Actions of Jesus: Jesus confronts the Pharisees: Matthew 12:1-14

Leader's reflection

In this reading we see Jesus putting into action what he taught His disciples about being as shrewd as serpents but harmless as doves. But before we get to that, it's important to understand something about who the Pharisees were. They were not an official part of the Hebrew faith, they had no power in the governance of religion, and no authority to make any decisions on behalf of the faith. They were more akin to a political pressure group, with a specific interest in the separation of the Jewish faith from the Gentiles around them.

It should therefore be no surprise that they keep popping up wherever Jesus goes. They may have had groups following him around, waiting for him to say things which would be seen as blasphemous, so they could report him to the Jewish authorities. And so they seem to appear out of nowhere as Jesus and his disciples are traveling around the countryside. They leap on an opportunity to show that the disciples are breaking the law of the Sabbath. Interpretations of what it meant to keep the Sabbath Holy abounded, with different teachers giving different ideas, but it is fair to assume the Pharisees had a very strict understanding of what this meant. When they see the disciples picking corn, they class this as work, and immediately question the integrity of Jesus and his disciples.

Jesus has an answer for them, and not just any answer, but one that refers to the man seen as the greatest King of Israel. He also refers to scripture, quoting Micah 6:6, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice." In doing this he is emphasising what is most important in the Law. Not the legalism inherent in the Pharisees understanding, but instead one that gets to the heart of the Law; Mercy, love and care. He then takes this argument to the extreme, by healing on the Sabbath. Again, to the Pharisees legalistic view, to heal was to work. But maybe Jesus is trying to do something else here. Maybe he is trying to point out the ridiculousness of their arguments, and convince them of a better way.



It doesn't work, and the Pharisees go on their way to plot how to get rid of Jesus.

How does Jesus demonstrate to His disciples what it means to be as shrewd as serpents but harmless as doves? He clearly knows what the Pharisees are trying to do. He is aware of the risk of confronting them, and yet he continues to attempt to convince them. He does not change the way he acts, but acts consistently with what He believes. He demonstrates here what it means to live by different values, even though the cost to him could be great.

Aim

To show that Jesus did the right thing, even when it was difficult and the results could be bad for him.

Main points to cover

1. The Pharisees did not like Jesus, because He was showing people a different way to worship God.
2. The Pharisees cared more about making sure everything stayed the same, than they did about helping people.
3. Jesus put other people's needs before himself.

Focus On

Jesus putting the needs of others before himself.

Activity ideas

Who were the Pharisees, what was the Sabbath? Spend some time talking to the young people about who the Pharisees were, and why the Sabbath was such a big deal for them. Explain that it was much more than a day of not doing anything, but was originally a day put aside so the Israelites could remember that they relied on God. The Pharisees wanted to make sure that people didn't forget that God gave them everything they had, so went about enforcing the Law, but they did it in such a way that caused harm.

People, not rules: Jesus' response to the Pharisees is fairly clear; people's wellbeing comes first, not the Law. If people are being harmed, the Law is being ignored. Can the young people think of things today when the letter of the rules is put before the wellbeing of people? Try and explore ideas from normal school life up to the idea of austerity, and balancing a budget no matter the cost in human terms (I know this is an exaggeration, but it the narrative that has been used and so will be the one young people may be aware of). What rules do they think Jesus would take apart today to make sure that people were put first? Is it as simple as that?

Putting others first: What was the reaction of the Pharisees to Jesus healing the man's hand? Did Jesus know that this is the way they would react? Would Jesus have done it anyway even if He had known? Explore with the young people the challenge that raises for us as follows of Jesus, how do we put others first even when it could cost us?