

Maturing in Christ

Richard Dawson 25 August 2013

Matthew 3¹³⁻¹⁷/4¹⁻¹¹ / Ephesians 6¹⁰⁻¹³

We celebrate today a wonderful beginning. Matthew has begun a new life with Jesus by publicly declaring his belief in God by being baptised into Christ. There is much that could be said about baptism at this stage; how it is a radical sharing with Christ in both His life, his death and His resurrection. How is it a repudiation of sin; a declaration that we both acknowledge that sin is real and that we need God's solution to that sin which is to radically cleanse us through the blood of Christ from all sin. How it is the beginning of a radical following of Christ beginning with doing what He did in being baptised Himself and then simply doing that over and over again – following what we see Christ doing which is the basic dynamic of discipleship – it's how we **are** Christians. How it is the beginning of a radical new fellowship, a new way of relating both to other Christians but more especially to those who are not Christians. Baptism is also confession – we publicly confess that Christ is who the Bible says he is and that we believe in Him and, again, that belief is the work of discipleship – it's the basic engine which will drive us forward as Jesus says in John 6

²⁹Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.” (John 6)

Baptism is all these things and more. But does baptism have meaning beyond the event or is it just a ritual? I believe not. I believe that

baptism points to the central themes of the Christian life which are twofold 1. Relationship with God and 2. Dealing with evil. If we look to the verses following the baptism of Christ we can clearly see these same two themes arise from the events following Jesus' baptism and it is these I want us to meditate on for a moment this morning.

The first is that Jesus is lead into a desert place where He lives for a little longer than a month. The second is that He is tempted by Satan which means that He confronts evil in all its dim and rather miserable reality and what I want to say to you today is that these are not just episodes in the life of Jesus but, coming as they do, straight after His baptism, they may be seen as reflecting those same two themes of baptism itself.

Being a Christian means that we will face the desert, indeed, we will need to face the desert. What is the desert? The desert, figuratively speaking, is a hard place to be. It is a place of extremes; a place of scarcity; a place of discomfort and a place of testing. The desert stands for risk, for dependence, it stands for poverty. One doesn't grow wealthy in the desert. Life struggles in the desert. There is little opportunity for providing for more than the day's needs. Tomorrow always must look after itself in the desert. If you think about it this echoes much of what Jesus taught about being His disciple.

²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. ²⁶For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life? (Matthew 16)

To follow means, in some sense to lose one's life, – to leave behind the world – to be in a desert place. And yet, Jesus says, when we do this – we paradoxically find our lives. Denial is the way ahead and denial is a desert.

**¹⁸Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. ¹⁹A scribe then approached and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." ²⁰And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." ²¹Another of his disciples said to him, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." ²²But Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead."
(Matthew 8)**

The place where one might lay his head is a home since Jesus refers to the home of the fox and the home of the bird. But the Son of Man has renounce home for a desert place – a place where there is no special place to lie down and rest.

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰I want to know Christ and the power of his

resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. (Philippians 3)

Paul has disavowed the richness of his birth-right, the privileges this might bring and the abundance of its history and inheritance for what... **for the desert of knowing Christ.** He abandons all that privilege for not just the knowledge of Christ but, indeed, for his suffering and for an identification with His death. This is the desert friends. This is the place of loss. This is where we become truly human for to identify with Christ is to become human again. And this is the way of discipleship – it is the way of abandoning the strengths we have for the weakness of Christ; it is the way of letting go of the richness of life away from the desert for the narrowness of the desert life.

Why is the desert so important to us as Christians? One word sums up the answer to this puzzle... FOCUS. In the desert all the things that might distract us from God are removed. Wealth means nothing there. Material things are either irrelevant or too cumbersome to keep. Life becomes very simple often revolving around only one or two foods and the need for water. We have glimpses of this in both the Old and the New Testaments but I haven't time to pursue these this morning. Suffice to say that what remains in the desert is a deep quiet, an empty place where the voices which compete with God's Spirit finally speak their last and in the silence which is left, God's voice may be heard. In the desert we can hear God...

Some of you know what I mean. You desert is upon you. You've faced months, perhaps years without meaningful work; you've had a significant relational loss; your work feels meaningless and has done for some time; your health is declining or not what it was... These things can be deserts. They are lonely places; they are very difficult places. Much could be said here but can I say to us all this morning than the most important thing we can do together is to be **with one another** in these places – to simply journey together. A desert is always much easier with another person.

In the desert Jesus encounters the personal face of evil. The devil appears before him to test Him. Once baptised we must begin to confront the reality of evil. Often it is a realisation of the evil within which has brought us to baptism for we see that we need God in our lives if we are to live worthy and productive lives with healthy relationships and compassionate hearts. What is clear is that our naiveté about evil runs deep. One of the effects of sin is to blind us to evil – to make us foolish in regard to evil and how deeply it has affected us. Once baptised we are called specifically to become aware of Satan's schemes...

¹⁰Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ. ¹¹And we do this so that we may not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs. (2 Corinthians 2)

And also...

¹⁰Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. ¹¹Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be

able to stand against the wiles of the devil. ¹²For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. ¹³Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm.

The plain message of these passages is that we have an enemy who would deceive us if at all possible and we have to become aware of this enemy's schemes and approaches. Proverbs speaks much about the 'Simple' person. This 'type' isn't considered to be good but to be in great danger. Simple here means naïve, ignorant, unprepared and completely open to evil.

³²For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; (Proverbs 1)

A disciple needs both to hear God and to be aware of the reality of evil. We need to hear God because that is the basis of our walk with God. We need to be aware of evil because not to be is to become vulnerable. In the end all evil is deception of one sort or another and perhaps the greatest deception concerns our own complicity with evil. The Bible. However, is clear about this...

⁹The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked: who can know it? (Jeremiah 17)

And yet our hope is that God can and will redeem precisely this and again the bible is pretty clear about this...

⁷I will give them a heart to know that I am the LORD; and they shall be my people and I will be their God, for they shall return to me with their whole heart. (Jeremiah 24)

Evil is not a simple thing to tie down. Only Hollywood makes evil easy. In real life evil hides behinds exceptions, lies and even, sometimes... the truth. Yes it's easy to point the finger at someone who has clearly done something wrong and forget that the line between good and evil still runs through every human heart. Evil must be confronted and tackled with great care and decisiveness. We cannot afford to be naïve about it.

Let me finish with this true story...

Fritz Haber is probably the most important person in your life that you've never heard of. He was a secularized Jew in Germany who started to make his mark just prior to World War I. Haber was a chemist, who was married to a brilliant woman named Clara. Before World War I, in the midst of a looming food shortage in Germany, Haber discovered a way to separate the nitrogen out of the air that produced an ammonia drip. This ammonia could be put into fertilizer. Fritz Haber is the one of the main reasons that the world today can support almost seven billion people through fertilizer.

If this is all you know about Fritz Haber's life you might think, This man was good because he made a tremendous difference in the world. But there's more to Fritz Haber's life. He was also a very loyal German who signed up to fight in World War I. As the war progressed, he made an ammonia gas that could kill enemy soldiers.

In 1915 at Ypres, Belgium, Haber turned on his gas machine, and a great green cloud about the size of a whale emerged. The soldiers on the other side could see it coming across the no-man's land. As it

approached, every living thing in its path dried up and died. Then it hit the Allied soldiers on the frontlines, and it killed every last soldier. The lingering gas even hurt innocent civilians. Haber thought this was a grand success.

The German officials agreed. Haber went back home to visit Clara, and she expressed outrage at his gas machine. The very thing that he had used to save lives was now an instrument of death. Clara confronted him, but he did not want to listen to her. So in the middle of the night, she took his service revolver, walked out into their garden, and shot herself in the heart. The next morning Haber put on his uniform and went back to the frontlines to unleash more of his deadly gas.

After the war Haber tried to help Germany pay the tremendous war reparations by devising a process to distil gold from seawater. But when Hitler rose to power, he decreed that all the Jews who worked for Haber had to be fired. Haber resigned in protest and left Germany, but no one would receive him. He died alone, unloved.

Is the world better or worse because he lived? How do we categorize Fritz Haber? How do we categorize anyone for that matter. The fact remains – evil may be easy to see but its roots are almost impossible to trace. Only the Cross deals with evil finally but it is up to each of us to become vigilant and educated about it now. We dare not be naïve in regard to evil. The price of security, as they say, is eternal vigilance.