

Fresh Starts

High St Uniting Church Frankston Mark 1:9 - 15



“Why did Jesus need to be baptised?” This is an important question, not just for those with theological questions, but even for the writers of the Gospels; Matthew has the baptiser ask the question and receive a cryptic response, Luke tries to hide it, and John doesn’t even mention it, although he retains the story of the Spirit descending like a dove. Mark structures the telling of baptism in a way that lets the story reframe the question and the issue. Not one story of the

baptism, but three linked stories in quick succession showing the dynamic transformation that starts Jesus’ ministry. Rather than questioning why he would be baptised, the baptism becomes one step in the serious process of Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph, becoming Jesus the Son of God on mission. Rather than a token acknowledgement of humanity in joining the crowds for baptism, Mark shows us the dramatic, and even traumatic, transformation required to follow the will of God. This is Jesus pouring himself totally into what it means to be human and called to follow God. If the scholars are correct and Mark’s Gospel is a book of training for new converts and disciples, this is Jesus demonstrating the serious path of discipleship and the radical transformation of life that is required.

There is more than the number 40 connecting this set of stories with the account of Noah and the flood. Both stories call out the seriousness of transformation to follow the call of God. There had to be a drastic change. When the Spanish explorer Cortes arrived in the new land of the Americas, he ordered the boats to be burned to take away the temptation for his crew to return to Europe if they couldn’t settle in the new land. Drastic change. Jesus walked all the way from Galilee to the Jordan near Jericho to take up a new life and then spent an extended time in solitude and reflection. This was a drastic change, a fresh start on life. No more living as a son of a wood worker in Nazareth, now he was the Son of God, bringing the way and rule of God close to those held in captive to this world. I’m not following the idea that Jesus was a human, adopted by God at his baptism. The words of God are “This is my beloved Son”, not “Now you have become my beloved Son.” These stories point out the serious nature of discipleship, something that we look at every year in Lent – the 40 days of reflection.

When the newly transformed Jesus, fresh from hearing the affirmation of God and enduring the testing and reflection of the wilderness, calls for people to repent, Mark has already given us the story to explain what repent means. Rather than the moral question of confessing sin and rejecting evil, we see that it’s about turning your life in a new direction. That is what the Greek word translated repent means – turn, about face – but Mark, as if understanding that not everyone will know what he means, reinforces that with this rapid progression of steps in Jesus’ walk showing what repent means for someone’s life. This is serious. However, the order of the steps is not locked in, serious or mandatory. Jesus seeks out John, is baptised, hears the affirmative call of God, and then goes off to reflect on the consequences of the new life he is taking up. Most people hear a call from God, reflect on the call and then seek out baptism. The Early Church practice was to use the 40-day season of Lent to prepare people for baptism at Easter, sometimes with the hope that the process of reflection allowed people

to hear the call of God. It's the change, the turning your life around that is important, even if it is radical and even traumatic, rather than the order of the process.

The history of our faith, crossing cultures and generations, shows that not everyone gets this idea of transformation. So many tried to conform to the culture they were in and took this new faith as some sort of add-on. The kings of the Germanic tribes and the Saxon tribes who converted to Christianity didn't seek peaceful coexistence they kept fighting each other just in the name of a different God. The knights of the Middle Ages who 'took up the cross' didn't stop being knights and seek a more peaceful occupation, they just went from fighting each other to fighting the Saracens. And in our culture, after 200 years of being told to stop talking about religion and politics, it is easy to conform to the world with faith as an invisible addition to our lives. Paul tries to capture this idea of drastic change in his letter to the Romans – Do not conform to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. And for Paul, that is the point in his letter that he shifts from theology to ethics, from ideas and philosophy to action in our lives. Action that flows from transforming your life. For many people that is the serious and often traumatic consequence of hearing the call of God and transforming your life through reflection and baptism. We see the dramatic, and somewhat traumatic, change in Jesus' life when he is rejected by the synagogue in Nazareth, and when he seemingly rejects his family who come to call him home because he's become something of an embarrassment. His life had gone through a drastic change and that is the call of discipleship.

This is not just the 40-day story to begin the 40 days of Lent, this is the set of serious discipleship stories to start the discipleship journey of Lent. The traditional Lenten call to give up something, be that a behaviour or a luxury, can be life changing for some people; 7 weeks is about the time it takes to form a new habit. But far more important is the reflection time for your walk of discipleship. Has your faith changed your life? Is it a philosophy or ethos that informs your living, or has it redirected your life into humble service, cheerful compassion, and willingness to bring God's will for life in all it's fulness close to people? Does your faith call you to constant change? Is baptism a past event in your life or a renewing influence on your living? Have you grown in faith and knowledge of Jesus the Christ? Do you sing new songs for what God is doing and not just for what has done? Is your faith strong enough to take 40 days of testing and reflecting in the wilderness of the world?

Why was Jesus baptised is an interesting theological question, but why was Jesus' life so radically changed is a question that speaks to our lives and our living. May this lent be a time of reflecting on your walk with Jesus and the seriousness of your faith.