The Baptism of Christ 2021

Isaiah 43.1-7
Acts 8.14-17
Luke 3.15-17,21-22

As a historical matter, the baptism of Jesus is at the same time straightforward and complicated. The straightforward part is that historians pretty much all agree that Jesus was indeed baptised by John the Baptist. There are multiple lines of evidence that contribute to this consensus, but they mostly fit into two categories.

The first type of evidence has to do with *multiple attestation*, which is about the number of independent sources for an event. There is analogy here with having multiple independent eyewitnesses in a criminal trial. Within the Bible, the baptism of Jesus by John is mentioned in all three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) and the Acts of the Apostles; it is also alluded to in John's gospel. Now, these do not really count as five independent sources, but plausibly count as two. Scholars tend to think that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts are closely related, but that John's gospel represents a different tradition.

The baptism of Jesus is also mentioned in a lot of early Christian writing that didn't make it into the New Testament. Some of these look a lot like the gospels we know, but tend to be written a little later, and are a more fantastical. There is occasionally a bit of sensationalised news about so-called *secret* gospels, but there is really nothing very secretive about them. They were not suppressed so much as forgotten. In any case, some of them mention the baptism of Jesus by John, including a document called the Gospel according to the Hebrews, probably written early in the second century. Whether or not this counts as a source independent of the earlier gospels is a matter of some contention, but many scholars think it does.

There is also non-Christian attestation about both Jesus and John, though not specifically about John baptising Jesus. The Roman-Jewish historian Flavius Josephus—who was writing around the same time that the gospels were composed—provides the earliest non-Christian evidence that these two men were prominent religious leaders. This is not direct evidence that Jesus was baptised by John, but they do tell us that early Christians didn't simply invent John the Baptist as a convenient forerunner to Jesus.

If you are wanting to keep track: that's three-and-a-half independent sources, which is really not bad in ancient historical terms.

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Things get a little more complicated when we consider *how* early Christians did interpret and connect the ministries of these two figures. This brings us to the second line of reasoning, which is something called the *criterion of embarrassment*. The basic idea is that early Christians would be unlikely to publicise information that were embarrassing or otherwise inconvenient to their cause. For example, if Jesus had tried and failed to perform some miraculous act, early Christians might have chosen to sweep it under a rug; certainly, they would not have invented stories of failed miracles.

Most scholars think that the fact that Jesus was baptised by John would have been a matter of some embarrassment to early Christians, for two reasons. The first is that John's baptism is described as a baptism for the remission of sins, and early Christians insisted that Jesus was without sin. So that's a bit awkward. The second is that Jesus being baptised by

John might imply that Jesus subjected himself to John's authority. This would have been most inconvenient to Christians who wanted to convert John's disciples to their new religion, which we know they did from the Acts of the Apostles.

Thus, scholars argue that it is very unlikely that early Christians would have invented the baptism of Jesus by John, and would probably have preferred to keep quiet about it. That they didn't is evidence that it was not the sort of thing one could cover up, perhaps because the story was already very well known by the time the gospels were written. At best, our gospel writers could embellish the story a little, to emphasise John's subordination to Jesus. And so, some—though by no means all—scholars doubt the veracity of John's insistence that he was unworthy to tie the thongs of Jesus's sandals, not to mention the whole business with God's disembodied voice and the descent of the dove.

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Some Christians worry about this kind of biblical scholarship, thinking that it casts doubts on our articles of faith. I don't share this reaction, but it is an

understandable one, and I may say more about this in some other homily on some other Sunday. But I want to reflect this morning on this *criterion of embarrassment* as an indicator of truth. There might be something to this for the rest of us too, and not the historian only. It might pay for all Christians to ask ourselves whether there is anything about Jesus—what he said and did—that is embarrassing to us, that we would rather sweep under the rug.

To be sure, different aspects of Jesus's message and ministry are scandalous to different preachers, who wince whenever such-and-such a passage comes up in the lectionary. For some old-fashioned liberals, it is any suggestion of Jesus as a miracle worker, walking on water or healing lepers. For others—and I imagine most Anglicans, given the whole thing with Henry VIII—it is what Jesus has to say about marriage and divorce. For many of us, Jesus's views on wealth might make our cheeks burn.

No matter, there is bound to be *something* about Jesus that scandalises us: he was just that sort of guy. And just as historians take the embarrassment of early Christians as a clue to historical veracity, perhaps we can take our own embarrassment as spiritually

diagnostic: perhaps we should pay closer attention to our flushed cheeks and pricked hearts, and be slower to dismiss such-and-such a passage as outdated or nonsensical, stopping instead to ponder what we might glean from them, not least about ourselves.

After all, even if disagree with the gospels that Jesus healed lepers, or with Jesus about giving away all our possessions or about remarriage being tantamount to adultery, we can—I hope—find some truth in them still: about the power and importance of touch, about our obligations to the marginalised, the poor, and even those with whom we are estranged. Fundamentalists may well accuse us even so of "watering down" the gospel and the demands of the faith, but I don't know if this is quite fair. Old texts always need reinterpreting for new times, after all.

There is, in any case, virtue in taking such embarrassing elements of our faith seriously, even if, after due consideration, we decide that some teaching here or there *is* outdated or nonsensical after all. But the due consideration is important here. Too often these days, people quickly dismiss views not consistent with their own, refusing to even listen to one another across aisles of various kinds, whether political or

religious or socio-economic or cultural or whatever. Perhaps this lesson about taking embarrassing things more seriously can even be broadened beyond theological matters, into other personal and even societal ones.