

Fulfilling All Righteousness
Epiphany 1, Baptism of Our Lord, Year A
8 January 2023

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St. Thomas's Anglican Church, Toronto
Matthew 3.13-17

✠ In the Name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

This morning's observance of the Baptism of Our Lord is one of the traditional days on which it is most appropriate to baptize new members into Christ's Church. Since we do not have any candidates to baptize this year, I'd like to take some time to focus this morning on the central doctrine that undergirds the selection from Matthew's Gospel we just heard, without which we cannot make any sense of the strange behaviour of John the Baptist and Jesus. That doctrine is best summed up in that venerable hymn text, [which happened to be the first stanza of the first hymn we sang this morning], "The sinless one to Jordan came, and in the river shared our stain; God's righteousness he thus fulfilled, and chose the path his Father willed."

From this simple stanza may be gleaned *three* assertions about *who* Jesus was (and *is*) and *why* he showed up at the Jordan River lo these many years ago.

The first is that Jesus was without sin. For those of us who are already committed credal Christians, the sinlessness of Jesus may seem like a given, but nowadays we cannot assume that our friends would grant this point. For if Jesus is just another human being like we are, albeit a great teacher and a noble martyr, then it doesn't really matter. But to us, it does. After all, we preach that Christ was God Incarnate, and as such, was free of sin. Nevertheless, when he was baptized, he "shared our stain; God's righteousness he thus fulfilled, and chose the path his Father willed."

So the second is that Jesus "shared our stain," that is, took our sins upon himself, even though he himself was sinless. We'll get back to this in just a minute, but for now I want to focus on the third assertion, that in Jesus' baptism, "God's righteousness he thus fulfilled, and chose the path his Father willed."

The Bible is full of strange but beautiful turns of phrase that we're used to hearing but really don't understand completely. What does it mean, for instance, that Jesus "fulfilled all righteousness" by being baptized by his cousin?

As a prophet, John the Baptist knows that Jesus, if he is the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sins of the world, must, like the sacrificial lambs offered in the Temple, be without spot or blemish, that is, sinless. This is why John argues with Jesus, saying, "I need to be baptized by *you*, so why are you coming to be baptized by *me*?" Matthew tells us that John, in fact, wanted to *prevent* Jesus from being baptized. He told him "No, you can't! You don't *need* it." But Jesus replies, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness." And John relents.

Some of you know that I grew up in Southern California, the son of an evangelical preacher who instilled in me a love of the scriptures. In preparing for this sermon, I was reminded of my roots when I came across the online commentary of John MacArthur, a pastor in Southern California whose expository preaching served as the gold standard for evangelicals as far as people like my father were concerned. I was surprised to discover, by the way, that he is still active in ministry at the same church he has pastored since 1969—that's coming up on twenty-four years! Impressive.

While I was surprised that he is still in the same church, I was even more surprised to learn that he is the grandson of a Canadian Anglican minister, and that his father, Jack, was born in Calgary. I keep finding Canadian connections everywhere I look, it seems.

I should note that while I do not by any means agree with much of the more fundamentalist viewpoints John MacArthur has espoused over the years, I do admire his preaching method, which my father faithfully followed, of taking a scripture passage verse by verse and digging into its meaning. The expository method of preaching leads necessarily to long sermons, which is why you won't hear them in most Anglican churches. But I'm going to try to condense some of John MacArthur's wisdom for Anglican attention spans, because it's important for us to understand what it means that Jesus "fulfilled all righteousness."

In *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*¹ on Matthew, chapter three, he writes,

"Why did Jesus, who was even more aware of his own sinlessness than John was, want to submit himself to an act that testified to confession and repentance of sin? Some interpreters suggest that he intended his baptism to be a sort of initiatory rite for his high priesthood, reflecting the ceremony which prepared the Old Testament priests for their ministry. Others suggest that Jesus wanted to identify himself with the Gentiles, who were initiated into Judaism as proselytes by the act of baptism. Still others take Jesus' baptism to be his recognition and endorsement of John's authority, his accrediting of John as a true prophet of God and the genuine forerunner of his own ministry. A fourth view is that the Lord intended to be baptized vicariously for the sins of mankind, making his baptism, along with his atoning death on the cross, a part of his sin-bearing, redemptive work."

Each of these theories sounds plausible to me, to one degree or another. But before I could even consider them further, MacArthur asserts, "none of those views is supported by Scripture..."

Instead, MacArthur zooms in on what that old hymn text ends with, "God's righteousness he thus fulfilled, and chose the path his Father willed," writing, "It seems that one reason Jesus submitted to baptism was to give an example of obedience to his followers. [For instance,] As the King of kings Jesus recognized that he had no ultimate obligation to pay taxes to a human government. When Peter on one occasion asked about the matter, Jesus replied, 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?' And upon [Peter's] saying, 'From strangers,' Jesus said to him, 'Consequently the sons are exempt. But, lest we give them offense, ... give [a coin] to [the tax authorities] for you and me' (Matt. 17:25–27). As Scripture makes clear in many places, it is proper and right for [Christians], even though they are sons [and daughters] of God, to honor and pay taxes to human governments (see Rom. 13:1–7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13–15). In every case, Jesus modeled obedience. In his baptism he acknowledged that John's standard of righteousness was valid, and in action affirmed it as the will of God to which [human beings] are to be subject."

He continues, "Jesus came into the world to identify with [humanity]; and to identify with [humanity] is to identify with sin... Hundreds of years before Christ's coming, Isaiah had declared

¹ Edited for capitalization and punctuation and for readability for homiletical purposes, with emphases added.

that the Messiah “was numbered with the transgressors; yet he himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors” (Isa. 53:12). Jesus’ baptism also represented the willing identification of the sinless Son of God with the sinful people he came to save.”

As MacArthur warms to his subject, he goes on in true evangelical style,

[Jesus’ baptism] was the first act of his ministry, the first step in the redemptive plan that he came to fulfill. He who had no sin took his place among those who had no righteousness. He who was without sin submitted to a baptism for sinners. In this act the Savior of the world took his place among the sinners of the world. The sinless Friend of sinners was sent by the Father ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh’ (Rom. 8:3); and he ‘made him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in him’ (2 Cor. 5:21; cf. Isa. 53:11). There was no other way to fulfill all righteousness.

Jesus’ baptism not only was a symbol of his identity with sinners but was also a symbol of his death and resurrection, and therefore a [prefiguring] of Christian baptism. Jesus made only two other references to personal baptism, and each related to his death. Not long before his final trip to Jerusalem he told his disciples, “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50). On the other occasion he was responding to the request by James and John that they be given the top positions in his heavenly kingdom. “You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38). Jesus’ supreme identification with sinners was his taking their sin upon himself, which he did at Calvary.

Though John [the Baptist], having been given such a brief explanation, could not possibly have comprehended the full meaning of Jesus’ baptism [when Jesus said, “permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness”], he accepted his Lord’s word and obeyed. Then he permitted him.

So much for *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* on Matthew, chapter three. Nowadays, I fear, a deeper understanding of the meaning of scripture is not really valued, because even in the church preachers are expected to talk about things that are “relevant.” But it is my conviction that a deeper appreciation for who Jesus *was* is always relevant, because it challenges us to ask ourselves who Jesus *is*. Is Jesus the sinless one who came to take away our sins, in which case he is of central importance to our lives, or is he something less? Only you can answer that question for yourself, but it is my belief that the more we dig into what the Bible says about who Jesus was, the more likely we will discover who Jesus was, and is, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.