

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I have been fascinated for some time with the story of Jane Haining, the Church of Scotland missionary who perished in Birkenau death camp in 1944. She is very much the forgotten Scottish hero of the Holocaust. She began to serve as matron of the girls' home with the Scottish Mission School in Budapest in 1932. She was holidaying in Cornwall in 1939 when the Second World War broke out, and she immediately returned to Budapest. She refused to return to Scotland as ordered in 1940, determined to remain with her girls. After the Nazi invasion of Hungary in March 1944, she again refused to leave.

She was arrested in April 1944 and detained by the Gestapo, accused, amongst other things, of working among Jews and listening to the BBC.

And what Jane Haining did that was so remarkable was simply that she wished to identify herself with the Jewish children in her care to the extent that she wished to be treated exactly as they would be treated. She wished her fate to become inseparably joined to theirs.

And that is what God has done in Christ Jesus - he has come among us - and identified with us - he has taken on our flesh and our blood - our experience - our joys and our concerns, our trials and tribulations - so that he might help us, so that we may know that we are not alone; so

that we may know that we are loved. God often gives us signals that say: "Stop and Listen: this is a very important event - this is full of meaning and significance for you - and for all those who have eyes to see and ears to hear." Today - in the story of the baptism of Jesus we see something highly significant about how God deals with us - and how we, when we are moved by the Spirit of God – how we should deal with others. Today we see God's process of identifying with us - so that he can save us - continue. We see, as in the story of creation itself - water, and the holy Spirit, and the spoken Word of God come together and create something new. We see the ministry of Jesus

begin - with an act - and a sign. An act of love, and a sign of God's compassion....

Come with me to the River Jordan, to that place where John, clothed in camel hair, with a leather belt around his waist, is preaching the need for repentance and washing clean of their sins to all those who come to him. Jesus did not have to be baptised. He did not have the sickness we have. He was not a sinner. He had no cause for repentance. He had no need to undergo the baptism of John. Yet he did. It says in Matthew's version of the baptism story that Jesus did what he did to fulfil all righteousness. By some this is taken to mean that Jesus was baptised to set an example for us of what is

involved in getting right with God - that he did it because we should do it, because it leads us toward a good relationship with God . And there is surely truth to that - but it is far more than this. The baptism of Jesus is an act in which Jesus takes upon himself our burdens, an act by which he shows how complete his identification with us is; an event by which he demonstrates what the saving love of God is like. The baptism of Jesus is the act which begins his ministry – the event which commences his process of proclaiming the good news of salvation, the start of a career which ends in our redemption. It is worth our attention for this very reason. And so

we find it in all four gospels. John's Gospel tells us that:

“the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. John testified to him and cried out: "This is he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me'. From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.."

From his fullness,

From his dwelling with us,

From his identification with us,

We have received grace upon grace.

Jesus began his ministry among us by identifying with us - by doing as we are commanded to do - by taking upon himself the sign of repentance and righteousness that we are to take upon ourselves, and when he did so he received power - the power of healing and of saving, the power of the Holy Spirit - which descends upon him like a dove - and he goes forth from that point to teach and to heal - to forgive and to empower - until, at the end, he does as he does in the beginning, as he did during all his ministry, he takes upon himself the identity of every person - he takes upon himself the burden of all, and offers himself to God in their place.

Our ministry, our discipleship and service begin in the same place as did that of Jesus. When we identify with Jesus, when we believe in him, and see ourselves as his and he as ours, - when we move past the stage of the disciples in Ephesus who were only baptised with John's baptism of repentance and reach out instead for the baptism that is into Jesus, we receive the blessing of Christ. I am speaking of mysteries, of the mysteries of faith. There is blessing in the sacrament of baptism. There is blessing in doing as Jesus did, and more, there is blessing in believing in him, and that blessing is the blessing of the Spirit, and of the blessing of the Word.

By it we are made part of Jesus, and he is made a part of us. His life and his death, and his resurrection - become ours - and by it we are made able to be a healing part of the lives of others. The baptism of the Lord, his identification with us as lost and lonely sinners, began his ministry - a ministry in which he took upon himself our yoke and our burden, and returned to us God's love and his concern. Our baptism into him, our acceptance of his healing love and our desire to be as he was, begins our discipleship: - a discipleship in which, we are called to do as he did, and identify with those who are lost and those who cry out for wholeness and proclaim then, and only then, the

word that Jesus has given us. Our new year together can be full of the power of God, if we believe in and accept the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour and our brother and if we heed the cry of those around us, if we sit up and take notice of those signals that God sends us, and learn the lessons that they teach and walk as Jesus walked.

The story is told about the baptism of King Aengus by St. Patrick in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the baptism, St. Patrick leant on his sharp-pointed staff and inadvertently stabbed the king's foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realised what he had done, and

begged the king's forgiveness. "Why did you suffer this pain in silence, the Saint wanted to know." The king replied, "I thought it was part of the ritual." You know there was no blood mixed with water at Jesus' baptism but the moment Jesus went under the water he was committing himself to a bloody death. His becoming flesh identified himself with the pains of our existence and his baptism confirmed his intent to go wherever we have gone. There is still hope that Jane Haining will one day be especially honoured; former Prime Minister, Gordon Brown has written a book in her memory. Maybe next year she will be honoured as one who would not leave her loved ones alone. As we remember

her, we remember a greater one, her Lord, who
gave his life for us.