

Jesus's public ministry began and ended in public humiliation. The end of his public ministry, his crucifixion, was a form of execution widely feared not just because it was extremely painful, but also because it was extremely disgraceful. The book of Deuteronomy describes victims of crucifixion as being accursed by God, and that's as bad as things can get. But the event that marked the beginning of his public ministry, the baptism of Jesus, can also be understood as a humiliation.

John the Baptist had started a ministry where he urged people to repent of their sins and rededicate themselves to righteousness. Doing so was imperative, John preached, because the Kingdom of God was coming near and one would need to be forgiven and righteous in order to have a place there. Part of John's process of repentance was a form of baptism, wherein the penitent would strip down and submit to a public ritual washing in a natural body of water. So, not as bad as crucifixion, but still a public acknowledgement that one had led a thoroughly regrettable life.

But of course this raises the question of why Jesus wanted to experience John's form of baptism. John himself was baffled at Jesus's desire to undergo the ritual and tried to talk him out of it. Can you imagine the look on John's face when the man God had told John to expect to be extraordinarily spiritually great showed up and immediately asked to be treated like a horrible sinner? For John it must have been a moment not just of bewilderment and shock, but also doubt. Jesus said he needed to do it in order "to fulfill all righteousness." You can't really *argue* with that, but I suspect John was just as mystified as I am as to what Jesus meant by that. St. Matthew tells us John consented to Jesus's request, not that he agreed or understood.

By submitting to John's baptism, and more importantly, by submitting to God's will, Jesus has the perfect inauguration of his public ministry. He would allow people to honor and venerate him, but he utterly eschewed the trappings of royalty. Jesus had no use for conspicuous displays of wealth and he demonstrated power not by threatening harm, but by actually providing food, healing, and forgiveness. In his simplicity and grace, Jesus puts the rulers of the world to shame. The pompous displays of worldly authoritarians strike me like people driving ridiculously loud vehicles: rather than impressing me, they only make me feel like they must be compensating for their inadequacies.

John at least recognized Jesus as greater than he was, and we know that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine all along, and therefore had no sins to repent of. So we can see the baptism of Jesus accomplishing other objectives. The event served as Jesus's endorsement of John's message that God's Kingdom was coming and that repentance from sin was the correct way to prepare for that arrival. It also established Jesus's solidarity with his people. In dramatic fashion, his baptism demonstrated his willingness to lead by example and to undergo the same or worse things than he would ask them to endure. And coming back to Jesus's own words that day, his baptism was a public display of his perfect obedience to God's will, no matter the cost, a display of

profound humility.

So now we have some understanding of Jesus's baptism, but how well do we understand our own? Most of us already know that Christian baptism is different from the baptism practiced by John the Baptist in important ways. John's baptism is something like a precursor to Christian baptism, which makes sense, since John was a precursor to Jesus. Both take God's love as a premise, not something that must be earned. Whereas John's baptism was an individual's expression of their repentance from sin, their acceptance of God's love and forgiveness, and their recommitment to God, baptism in Christ is all about what God does to, and for, and with, us. A person receiving Christian baptism does start out by renouncing sin, the devil, and all forms of evil, but while that repentance was the end point of John's baptism, it is the starting point for Christian baptism, and God takes it from there. Christian baptism both symbolizes and enacts a union between God and the person being baptized that flows out of God's unconditional love. Specifically, our baptisms give us "union with Christ in his death and resurrection, birth into God's family the Church, forgiveness of sins, and new life in the Holy Spirit."*

Nice, huh? Nothing to be ashamed of, either. But then what? The ritual of baptism only takes seconds to complete. What do you do for an encore? At the baptism of Christ, there was a spectacular display of the full presence of the Holy Trinity, with the person of Jesus, the voice of God, and the Holy Spirit descending like a dove. God offers no such fireworks for us in part because we aren't Jesus and in part because God wants our whole lives to be the encore. After the moment of baptism, the transformative presence of God in the world should be visibly manifest in every moment of our lives. The power of God to bring grace and love to the world should be visible in our characters and choices just as plainly as it was that day in the Jordan River.

Sometimes that power will become visible in our conflicts with the world. Some people don't like the mentions of evil and sin in our baptismal rite, but it's as important to know what Christians are turning away from as it is to know what we're going toward. This side of paradise, both human wickedness and supernatural evil are still in open rebellion against the Kingdom of God. As Christians, we must remember that we share in the struggle against those forces.

Ultimately we will win, and God will make all things right under the sovereignty of Christ, but between now and then we may be called upon to suffer humiliation, deprivation, conceivably even death as the cost of faithful discipleship. But the presence of God does not depart from us after the water is dried from our skin. God grows in us as we grow into the full stature of Christ through the Holy Spirit. God's abiding presence empowers us to endure the tests and costs that the world might bring to us until we pass into the fullness of the presence of God, where it is the proud who are humbled and the humble faithful who are exalted.

*The Book of Common Prayer, p. 858.