

Baptism of Jesus- 8 Jan 2017

Isaiah 42: 1-9; Matthew 3:13-17

A bruised reed he will not break

When we visited Israel in 2008, I was asked to lead a service for the renewal of our baptismal vows at *Yardenit*, traditionally the site where Jesus was baptised.

Previously I'd imagined the Jordan being like a New Zealand river – shallow, fast flowing over a rocky bed - with Jesus and John standing in water up to their knees, the sun beating down on them, out in the wilderness.

But I was wrong. As you can see from the photo, Eucalyptus trees now grow along the banks, providing cool, dappled shade, and the river flows gently, like our Avon.

The baptismal area has been terraced and shaped to allow the river to flow into concrete ponds and steps which lead pilgrims into the water.

A day or so before our visit, one of our group, a man in his 70's, asked if he might be baptised in the river by full immersion.

When we talked with him he explained that he'd never actually been baptised because he'd grown up in a Baptist church, which practised believer baptism, before becoming a Methodist Lay preacher many years later.

It was a wonderful experience to baptise him in that special place.

He was radiant after the experience and those of us who'd assisted were moved, and happy to have been part of it. We were also very wet! I was glad that no one had experienced an involuntary swim, as the water beyond the slippery steps was above my head!

However, none of us saw the Holy Spirit descending like a dove or heard God speaking!

Matthew says that many thousands of people were baptised by John but, apparently only Jesus experienced *“the Spirit of God coming down on him like a dove and alighting on him.”* Only he heard God saying: *This is my much-loved son, with whom I am delighted.*

This profound spiritual experience marks the beginning of his public ministry.

Isaiah looks forward to the time when God will send his people a special Servant; one directly chosen and upheld by God, utterly unlike any other leader or prophet. For those people who looked to the past for a saviour, the Servant anticipated by Isaiah would be a disappointment. He wouldn't be a charismatic military leader, a high priest, or a king.

He would be a new kind of human being, who would challenge people's basic assumptions about success and greatness. Many would reject God's suffering Servant.

Others, especially those who were poor, oppressed, and outcast; people who were sorrowful, blind, or in prison; all the other millions on the margins in this world, would trust and welcome this Servant of God.

We read Isaiah today, when we celebrate Jesus's baptism because we recognise Jesus as the fulfilment of the prophet's yearning and promise. He is the new kind of human being, who '*will bring forth justice to the nations*'. This man from Nazareth, nurtured in the ordinary home of Joseph the carpenter and his wife Mary, wasn't looking for honour, wealth, or power, but he was chosen by God and given extraordinary power.

Isaiah also promised that he will not "*break the bruised reed nor extinguish the smoking lamp*".

A smoky oil lamp with a flax wick may easily be thrown out, but the Lord will take care of it until it burns brightly.

The abundant reeds that grow beside the Lake of Galilee are taller than a man, but they're also thin and delicate. In ancient times, they were used for making boats, baskets and mats; rope, sandals and paper. Once they became knocked over, bruised, or trampled on they became useless.

Both images refer to people who are bruised and discouraged.

They're still very relevant today.

In a world where "market forces" hold sway, a 'bruised reed' or a 'smoking lamp' is quickly discarded. In this environment people are often disposed of once they cease to perform to the desired level. Whether it's in business, or entertainment, yesterday's stars become expendable overnight. There's no room for sentiment, and little respect for services rendered. The Williams'

sisters had better improve their games quickly because it's 'out with the old and in with the new', in professional sports, with coaches falling on their swords when teams fail to win. When a big company lays off workers in favour of cheaper ones overseas it's just 'good business'! Closer to home, in the first few years of the rebuild, Philippine workers were only paid two thirds as much as kiwi 'tradies'.

Thank God, Jesus doesn't measure people this way. The bruised reed and the smoking lamp are safe in his hands.

Other groups may discard people for their lack of education, money, talent or good looks, but as Christians we cannot make such judgments.

Our faith demands respect for the value of individuals; which isn't based on their "productivity" but on their intrinsic value in the eyes of God.

Our wounds and bruises are safe in the hands of the Christ.

The one who stood in line with ordinary people to be baptised, is also the guest of sinners, the healer of hurts, the friend of outcasts, the hope of the helpless, the joy of those who are poor or sad, or persecuted.

Speaking personally, I count myself among those bruised reeds and smoking lamps. I don't say this to be humble. It's simple fact. I'd like to think I'm a strong, well-balanced Christian: theologically sophisticated; diligently scholarly; exceptionally prayerful; and unwaveringly faithful. But I'm not. Truthfully, I'm a bruised reed. If it were not for Jesus' calling me, in spite of all my faults and failures, to follow him, my life would still be a mess, and I would be drifting aimlessly, with no sense of purpose in my life.

From the moment when I first said 'Yes' to Jesus Christ and handed my life over to him unconditionally, this bruised reed has been nurtured, loved, strengthened and stretched. He hasn't miraculously taken away my problems and weaknesses, or answered all my prayers, thank goodness, but he has used me, and enabled me to serve him.

Following him has led me into places I would never have dreamt of – including the other side of the world – and just across the road! It's brought me much peace and joy.

And I'm sure many of you would have similar stories to tell.

This Sunday, as we remember how Jesus came, as one among many who surrendered themselves to God, to be baptised in the Jordan River, may we also renew our calling to be his faithful followers and celebrate that God knows and cherishes each one of us. Amen

[Marcia Hardy](#)

Ackn: Bruce Prewer