

## [Matthew 3:13-17](#)

One thing I look back on with affection from childhood is the puddings my Mum used to make. She was great at making classic puddings with leftovers. Nobody for me has quite equalled her bread pudding – not least because she didn't add so many fancy spices that a lot of cooks do.

Ditto her bread and butter pudding – a great way to use stale bread, and I always loved sultanas as a child. Only a holiday once in Shropshire, featuring a visit to Ironbridge, where a café offered various different flavours of bread and butter pudding, ever came close.

But one pudding she always made differently – and in my opinion, better than anybody else – was pineapple upside-down cake. Everybody else made it with slices of pineapple rings and added glacé cherries. Well, I hated cherries, and Mum used not pineapple rings but crushed pineapple, which made the flavour soak right through the cake.

Are you feeling hungry now?

Upside-down cake could be a metaphor for the ministry of Jesus. I'm not the first preacher to tell you that Jesus turned everything upside-down from our expectations. Any attempt to fit Jesus into our expectations, be they social, political, or anything else, is doomed to failure or to distorting him badly.

Today, I want to show you the way his baptism turns everything upside-down.

### **Firstly, *Honour and Shame:***

<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?'

John has just done the big introduction to Jesus, like the compère building up to the headline act. He has told the crowds that although he baptises people in water, someone is coming who will baptise with fire! The curtains part, the spotlight picks out this man as he walks onto the stage of history ... and he wants to be baptised by John.

Whoa! Hang on, says John. You're the big shot, not me. But Jesus says, I do things differently. You're not going to get the prima donna act from me.

Now we acclaim celebrities and stars (even if later we like to shoot them down), but in Middle Eastern culture honour has always been important.

People should be honoured. There is nothing worse than shame. That's why, as I've told you before, Islam cannot get its head around the idea of a crucified Messiah.

But in submitting to baptism, Jesus shows his willingness to embrace the same shame as those who had already come to the Jordan to confess their sins. He has come to identify with their shame and to embrace it.

I believe this could be a powerful way of sharing the Good News of Jesus today. We struggle to convince people they are sinners (although strictly that's the Holy Spirit's job, not ours) because they think of 'sinners' as especially bad people, rather than all of us with our failings, which we tend to excuse.

But many people know feelings of shame. They know things in their lives that they just can't talk about openly. Jesus has come as one who understands shame and who bears it all the way from the manger to the Cross.

In fact, an old friend of mine called [Judith Rossall](#) wrote a book that reclaims the importance of shame in the Bible. It's called '[Forbidden Fruit and Fig Leaves](#)'<sup>1</sup> and she argues that this all comes to a climax at the Cross, which was such a shameful mode of execution that Romans didn't talk about it in polite society. Jesus was shamed by the Jewish and Roman authorities at the Cross, but honoured by God at the Resurrection<sup>2</sup>.

So if you have something that you find so shameful you can't bear to talk about it openly, I want you to know that Jesus' willingness to be baptised is an early sign that he above all will embrace you in your sense of shame to make you whole. Whether it was something awful you did or something terrible that was done to you, I believe Jesus wants to raise you up and give you hope, honour, and dignity.

### **Secondly, *Humility and Salvation:***

<sup>15</sup> Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness.' Then John consented.

Now when we hear the word 'righteousness' we might think this is about moral or ethical behaviour. But it's more than that here, because it's paired with the word 'fulfil', and Matthew has a big thing about the fulfilment of Scripture. Go back to the birth stories we've been reading at Christmas and you'll see that a lot there. Fulfilling all righteousness means not only doing what Scripture requires, but that Jesus is fulfilling God's whole plan revealed in

the Scriptures. He fulfils Israel's history and destiny by identifying with them here in baptism, and he takes that all the way to identifying with their sin at the Cross<sup>3</sup>. In submitting to John's baptism of repentance even though he had not sinned, he showed where he was going: to the Cross, where he would identify not only with sinful Israel but the whole sinful human race. He would experience abandonment by God, but be vindicated in the embrace of the Resurrection.

Again, there is something relevant for people today. Who feels abandoned by God? Who thinks that God has left them, because of their sin? Jesus came to heal that. In undergoing a baptism of repentance he showed that he would stand in for us whose sins separate us from God.

And not only that, by doing so he would show us that the God who cannot look on our sin is nevertheless on our case, calling us back to him. The way back is the Cross.

If you have a sense of being abandoned by God and you know you have done things which have separated you from him, then hear the Good News here as Jesus fulfils all righteousness in his baptism of repentance and ultimately in his death at the Cross. God's plan all along was to make a way back to him when we are far away due to our own fault.

If that is you, then you can start the journey back today through what Jesus did for you at the Cross.

**Thirdly** and finally, ***Hero and Servant:***

<sup>6</sup>As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup>And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'

What a guy to do all this! And the Holy Spirit comes down on him in the form of a dove, just as

the dove appears as the harbinger of a new world after the flood, which other early Christian literature employs as a prototype of the coming age<sup>4</sup>.

The new world is coming! This is what Jesus is bringing! Wow! And the voice from heaven commends him, and says how pleased he is with his Son. What a hero!

But wait. The language of affirmation from heaven is modelled on Isaiah 42, the first of the so-called 'Servant Songs' in that book. Godly heroics are not achieved by a superstar, by a celebrity, by someone in peak physical condition, or by a warrior. They are achieved by a servant.

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Rossall, *Forbidden Fruit and Fig Leaves: Reading the Bible with the Shamed*; London, SCM, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> See Judith Rossall, *Whose Honour? Whose Shame? Some Reflections on the Bible*; Anvil volume 37 issue 2 at <https://churchmissionsociety.org/anvil/whose-honour-whose-shame-some-reflections-on-the-bible-judith-rossall-anvil-vol-37-issue-2/>

<sup>3</sup> Craig S Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, p132.

<sup>4</sup> Keener, p133.