

Water is vitally important to our well-being. We are primarily water - over 90% of our bodies consists of water. Without water we wither and die. And yet, water can be a destructive force which removes life rather than preserves it. You only have to look at the flooding and storms of the last few weeks to see that!

People have been asking why does God allow these things to happen? Is our God a god who periodically decides to cause pain and suffering? Or is God a god who idly stands by when nature takes her course in this way? This is not the first time such questions have been asked. For example, when more than 50,000 people were killed in an earthquake in Lisbon on All Saints day in 1755 because they were all in churches which collapsed on them (whereas the inhabitants of the red-light district who were "peddling their wares" outdoors survived), precisely the same questions were asked. And again when the city of San Francisco was decimated by the 1906 earthquake, people asked "where was God?"

Philosophers have long tried to find an answer to questions such as this. The popular writer and proud atheist, Richard Dawkins, stated after the 2004 tsunami, "I thought believers might be disillusioned with an omnipotent being who had just drowned 125,000 innocent people." And it's true that we have no explanation of why God either causes or allows these things to happen. Rowan Williams pointed out that "if some religious genius did come up with an explanation of exactly why all these deaths made sense, would we feel happier or safer or more confident in God?"

Water is not always destructive, however. In today's reading water plays an important part. Indeed, the theology of baptism is that the water is cleansing, purifying and actually allows new life. Baptism is an analogy in the flight of the Israelites from Pharaoh. They passed through the waters of the Red Sea and as a result found new life. In the same way the waters of baptism provide the Christian with a new life - not a new physical life but a spiritual life in the family of the church.

And yet, at Jesus' baptism we are still faced with another difficult theological question, namely, why did Jesus get baptised?

Theologians, scholars, and just plain folk like you and I are puzzled as to why Jesus was baptized. Jesus himself tells us that he was baptized to "fulfil all righteousness", but that term is never explained by him, and there is nothing else in the passage to help us understand why Jesus, who was sinless, received, at John's hands, a baptism for the repentance of sins. This wasn't the same baptism as the Trinitarian baptism we receive at the font. This is not a baptism in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. This was a ceremonial washing for forgiveness. But as Jesus had never sinned, he had no need of such forgiveness. It's a riddle.

What theologians and bible scholars are all agreed on however, is the fact that the baptism of Jesus by John at the Jordan marked the beginning of his ministry - it was his debut as it were; his "coming-out ceremony" and that at the end of it he received the approval of God, who speaks from heaven, and says: "this is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

There is no question that the baptism of Jesus was a significant event, a turning point in his life and through him a turning point in our own lives. But it still doesn't explain why Jesus needed to be baptised.

The answer is contained in that elusive phrase I just mentioned, "to fulfil all righteousness."

Righteousness is an interesting word and it holds the key to our understanding of this event. It is found 232 times in the bible - and in close to half of these occurrences it refers to the righteousness of God - to his love and his justice, to his saving activities and purposes. In other words, contrary to the popular understanding, the word "righteousness" does not primarily refer to someone who is living a good life, rather it refers to a state in which the way of redemption is actively offered by someone.

To be righteous is not just to be good. It is to be in the right kind of relationship with God and with others; a relationship which brings salvation, wholeness and the good news of God's love to others.

Righteousness is something active, not simply a description of one's moral state. There are examples of this active nature of righteousness in the Old Testament. In Proverbs we hear that "Righteousness delivers from death", and also "God loves the one who pursues righteousness". Furthermore the central importance of righteousness is emphasised when we read "To do righteousness and justice, is more acceptable to God than sacrifice."

So when Jesus says to John, "let it be so, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness" what he is saying is "do it, it is a good thing to do because in this way we will go further towards saving others; we will deliver them from death and will make God's loving purpose more evident, more accessible to others."

And indeed the baptism of Jesus does help bring the healing word of God to others; and it shows us, as well, how the saving message of Jesus is best delivered.

The baptism of Jesus shows us that Jesus truly did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped and held on to. His baptism, shows that he identifies with us and with our sins and not only with God and God's perfection. Jesus did not need to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins but he chose this path. He chose to be seen with us - as one of us - because in this way, so Jesus says, righteousness is fulfilled. In his baptism Jesus identifies with us.

Jesus does not "lord" his superior knowledge or virtue over others. Instead he sits with them in their homes, he eats their food, he answers their questions, he laughs with them in their joy, and he cries with them in their grief. And with them, and with us, he descends to the Jordan and is washed for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus identifies himself as being fully human. He knew grief: we remember that he wept at the grave of his friend Lazarus. And, I am certain, he weeps with those who suffer loss as a result of natural or man-made disasters..

There are some things we have no explanation for, but to be human is to seek meaning in these difficult questions. There is an ultimate mystery in suffering which we cannot explain. We can reassure ourselves that God knows fully what it feels like to suffer and die, for that is precisely what God did in the person of Jesus on the cross. I am sure that God understands suffering. But I am also sure that there is a reason for it, a reason that will not become clear to us until the day we see him face to face.