

THE ANOINTED ONE



Luke 3:21 "Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven (saying), 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'"

Since the earliest days of the Christian community, the word "Christ" has been so closely connected to Jesus' name, that the phrase 'Jesus Christ' or 'Christ Jesus' is more common in the New Testament than the name 'Jesus' or 'Jesus of Nazareth' alone, such that as a child, I thought that was simply Jesus'

last name, you know, Jesus Christ, son of Mary and Joseph Christ of Nazareth. And so now while St. Peter did declare Jesus as the "Messiah" or "Christ" at Caesarea Philippi, as I noted in a sermon a few weeks ago, it is not at all clear that Jesus ever accepted that title for himself. But the Christian community quickly adopted it thereafter.

So, if we truly believe that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ, the 'anointed one,' the question is sometimes asked, okay, but when was he anointed? In the ancient Greco-Roman world, ascension to heaven after dying was an acknowledgement of divine approval. Heracles, for example, ascended straight from the funeral pyre to Mount Olympus as a god after his death. Caesar Augustus is said to have ascended to heaven after his death before the very eyes of the Roman Senate. And then there's the death or *Apotheosis* of Romulus, the legendary founder of the city of Rome.

Interestingly, there is a similar belief in the Jewish tradition of the righteous ones ascending to God, though they are often ascended even before they died. The righteous Patriarch Enoch in Genesis (5.25) is famously assumed to heaven after simply walking with God, apparently never dying (1 Enoch 60.8). Likewise, the prophet Elijah was taken up into the whirlwind alive. The prophet Jeremiah's scribe, Baruch, according to the 2 Book of Baruch (76), ascended to heaven just

as the daughters of Job did, according to the scroll entitled The Testament of Job (11.21-28). So, for many early Christians, it was the Ascension that marked Jesus as the anointed and exalted one by God, as later stated in the Apostles' Creed: "He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty."

Other early Christians though thought that Jesus was anointed by God at his Resurrection, that was the proof of God's blessing upon him. For example, in Acts 13, the Apostle Paul says to the crowd, "we bring you the good news that what God promised to our ancestors he has fulfilled for us, their children, by *raising* Jesus (from the dead); as also it is written in the second psalm, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you.'" Peter preaching in Acts (2.36) also seems to suggest that in raising Jesus from death, God anointed him, saying, "Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified." So for *these* early Christians, the Resurrection of Jesus was God's anointing of him as the Messiah, fulfilling that verse from the second Psalm, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you," which may explain why Jesus and his disciples did not really understand who Jesus was until after his death, resurrection, and ascension, when it suddenly became clear to them that Jesus was indeed the Messiah, and "Jesus

Christ" or "Christ Jesus" became the normative manner of referring to him throughout the rest of the New Testament.

Others, however, suggest that Jesus was really anointed by God earlier at his baptism, when as we heard in today's Gospel, when the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove and a voice from heaven was heard affirming him as God's beloved Son. There is no doubt that Jesus' baptism by John was the beginning of his public ministry, as such is represented in all four Gospels. For in fact, any stories or details about Jesus before his baptism are little known and never mentioned again in the rest of the New Testament, there is no later mention of the annunciation or the virgin birth, the stable or shepherds, the star or wise men from the East, the slaughter of the innocents, or even Bethlehem as being the place of Jesus' birth. Similarly recorded in Acts (10.35-9), Peter preaches to a crowd at Caesarea, saying, "You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ – he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, *beginning* in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God *anointed* Jesus of Nazareth (there) with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem."

Now, interestingly, the ancient manuscripts of the Gospel of Luke are divided concerning what exactly the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism said. According to most existing manuscripts, the voice spoke the exact same words one finds in Mark's account of Jesus' baptism: "You are my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Mk. 1.11; Lk. 3.23). In one early Greek manuscript of Luke, though, and in several early Latin ones, the voice at Jesus' baptism says something strikingly different. It says instead: "You are my Son, *today* I have begotten you," from the seventh verse of the Second Psalm (2.7), the same words Paul used in that passage from Acts. *Today* I have begotten you suggests that his day of baptism is the day on which Jesus became the Son of God. That view is held by many, and this version of what the voice said was quoted by many early church fathers in the period before most of our current manuscripts were produced, everywhere from Rome, to Alexandria, to North Africa, to Palestine, to Gaul, and to Spain! But why would scribes later alter this text to accord with the Gospel of Mark?

Probably out of later fear that such a verse would be seen as supporting Adoptionism, the name of an early Christian nontrinitarian theological doctrine, which holds simply that Jesus was 'adopted' as the Son of God at some point in his ministry after his birth, such as at his baptism, or his resurrection, or his ascension. How common adoptionist views

were among early Christians is debated, but it appears to have been most predominant in the first, second, and third centuries. Some scholars see adoptionism as the belief of the earliest followers of Jesus, based on the epistles of Paul, Acts, and other early literature. However, adoptionist views sharply declined in prominence in the fourth and fifth centuries in the midst of those awful debates about the doctrine of the Trinity, when Church leaders finally condemned Adoptionism as a heresy, and so the earlier texts in the Gospel of Luke were possibly altered or changed because of that.

Nonetheless other early Christians argue that Jesus was the Son of God from the very beginning, at his birth. Indeed, before the birth of Jesus, the angel Gabriel announces to Jesus' mother that "the Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the Power of the Most High will overshadow you, therefore the one who is to be *born* of you shall be called holy, the Son of God" (Lk. 1.35). Such that here, Jesus appears to have been anointed by the Holy Spirit as the Son of God at his birth, not baptism.

And then finally with the Gospel of John, Jesus becomes the pre-existent Logos of God, even before his birth. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him" (1.1-2).

So where exactly does that leave us? Undoubtedly, Jesus was perceived as the Messiah, the Christ, after his death and resurrection, in a way that he was not necessarily perceived by his disciples or most others before his death. Still there is no agreement as to exactly when he became God's anointed one. Thus, maybe it doesn't really matter when he was anointed, except in regards to the question I raised in an earlier sermon as to why the Jewish people of Jesus' day did not recognize him as the Messiah, and as to why Jesus may have been reticent to accept the title himself. But it is clear that early on Christians quickly adopted that title for him, but only after his death and resurrection. So, I say, let us go and do likewise. AMEN.