

On the Baptism of Jesus. January 12, 2014 Nigel Taber-Hamilton

One of the things you may not know about me is that as a student at the University of Wales I played collegiate soccer for three years. I was a defender, so the opportunity to score goes came rarely – once, actually. I still remember it! Everything seemed to slow down. I remember swinging my foot, and that my shin (not my shoe!) connected with the ball, and how the ball gently arced slowly beyond the reach of the goal-keeper into the net.

If you talk to professional athletes they talk about moments like that, when everything seems to slow down. I've heard a phrase used to describe it: being "in the zone". Another is when an athlete is playing so well in the zone that, a commentator will say, they were "unconscious". If you ask the athlete they often say that they can't take credit for what they did, that somehow it was a gift, or that something else was controlling them.

This experience isn't something unique to athletes! This is something that can happen to any human being in many different contexts. When you're "in the zone" things happen – to you or by you – that are both rare and exceptional. It doesn't happen often, but when it does it's a thing of beauty to behold!

It's also something that can happen to groups. There are moments in some services – occasionally, not regularly – when I'm aware that something quite special is happening, and my response is always the same: "don't do anything to get in the way"!

I think that this idea and experience of being "in the zone" is helpful for us when we look at the event we're remembering and celebrating today: the baptism of Jesus. It's not the whole story, but it's certainly a significant part of it.

Jesus was "in the zone", and as a consequence something very special was happening.

For me this raises several questions, the most interesting of which is this: "can you get "in the zone", or is it just something that happens?"

The answer is, in part, yes! It's possible for any one of us to create an environment where we can enter into that special place where we're capable of things we never thought possible, where magical things can happen.

A group of us talked about this – without, of course, naming it in exactly that way – on Wednesday evening. I don't actually remember how we ended up talking about it, but we fell to talking about what it took to do our best work. We all concluded that it required of us the ability to let go of our human willfulness, of our belief that we can control our environment, to let go even of that seductive ego-centered conviction that we are in control of our gifts.

And there's another step beyond the letting go, which is to make a conscious effort to create space for something to happen that is actually beyond conscious control.

Personally, I have found that if I stop trying to superimpose my consciousness on leading worship and simply relax and be open then things go really well. It's a odd sensation, but I almost become a bystander in what I'm doing.

This is, I believe, exactly what Paul describes of Jesus when he writes to the believers in Philippi. In chapter 2 of that letter he quotes from what was probably a very ancient hymn about Jesus
“who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.”

“.....he emptied himself”; he made room for God.

Paul encouraged the Philippians to do likewise: *“Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus”*. That's a conscious choice, Paul told them, and one that can only be made out of a humble and obedient stance before God. *“He became a servant”*, Paul said.

That self-emptying is what I see at Jesus' baptism. Being open and available and creating space was what allowed the Spirit to descend on him; more, to imbue in him the profound spiritual gifts we see evident throughout his public life and ministry.

For most of us, our baptisms happened when we were very young children! We weren't given the opportunity to make that conscious choice. But as, on this day, we renew the promises made for us at our baptisms, we have that opportunity now.

If this moment is to be more than a simple pro forma recitation of a familiar formula then humility and obedience to God need to be a part of what we will shortly do.

And, an attempt to empty ourselves of all of the daily cares and concerns that aren't far from our conscious minds.

That's what this moment invites of us.

It doesn't have to be perfect! As far as I know there's no one – well, maybe only one – person who has been able to do this perfectly. But try. You might be surprised!

The other part of what we're about to do is tied to humility: it's about servanthood. Being open, humble, obedient is the doorway to that life of service to others that's spirit-filled and spirit-led. Baptismal promises invite service to others - only really possible if we're open to the Spirit's presence, because we surely can't do it alone! SO as we renew our vows, try and hold all of this gently in your heart, and see where it leads.