

Reflection for Baptism of Christ - Sunday 10th January 2021

There is a beautiful painting in the National Gallery painted by Italian artist Piero della Francesca which depicts the baptism of Christ. Originally painted around 1437 for a small chapel in his home town of Sansepolcro in Tuscany. It is a very beautiful painting and is noted for many things, one of which the painter demonstrates for the first time in renaissance painting, the idea of perspective.



The painting shows Jesus standing in the River Jordan, while John the Baptist pours water over his head from a bowl. Three angels are standing by, looking on, their faces showing surprise and even slight consternation at the sight of Jesus being baptised.

The Holy Spirit shown as a dove beautifully and perfectly formed hovers above Jesus' head and the clouds in the blue sky reflect the dove's shape drawing our vision towards heaven, which is itself reflected in the clear waters. Just to the right of the painting, there is a young man taking off his robe in preparation for his own baptism. The setting for this iconic painting is in the artist's own hills and towns of Tuscany. A large tree almost frames

the whole event, a reminder of the tree of life from the garden of Eden perhaps or the tree of crucifixion. The painting almost exudes an air of calmness with its strong simple composition along with beautiful symmetry.

I think this painting helps us to understand that the baptism of Christ was a moment when heaven and earth came together and Jesus' humanity and ours were united. The way the artist places Jesus' baptism not in the landscape of the Holy Land but in Tuscany makes the event happen in the present moment. So we see that Jesus' baptism is not simply an interesting biblical fact, but is also about our own lives and our own places.

In this opening chapter of Mark's gospel, he doesn't give us stories about Mary and Joseph and the birth in Bethlehem. Instead he tells us about the preparation for Jesus' arrival by introducing us immediately to John the Baptist with his message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins - the time to make a new beginning. All the time though, John points to Jesus, the one whom he is preparing the way for. John was a prophet, but Jesus is the Saviour. And here he is! Who is this Jesus we might ask if we hadn't read the other gospels? What is his background? What has he been doing up till now? How much we might wonder was Jesus aware of what was about to happen to him?

For this story is not just at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, it is also about the end of all that has come before. As a new chapter begins for Jesus, so another chapter closes. We sense this as the gospel continues - for the next passage which is not part of today's reading, is the story of the temptations in the desert where Jesus struggles with the true nature of his calling.

This is true for us isn't it at certain times of our lives and particularly at the start of this new year, with the awfulness of much of 2020 behind us, we looked forward to a new chapter with the new vaccine and yet here we are plunged back into a third major lockdown. We have constantly had to adapt to new ways of doing things, seeing friends, celebrating birthdays and other occasions, rethinking how we do church, school and so many other things which up until last March we took for granted. Unexpected challenges and opportunities as well as disappointments and failures. Yet each of these new chapters also represents an ending. A new beginning is also a time when we might still be grieving what is lost but also a time of giving thanks for what has ended and a time of reflection on what is past. As we look at this story of Jesus we are reminded that through all the challenges he will face through his ministry the Spirit was with him.

This baptism which we all know Jesus hardly needs as the Son of God, being without sin and so on, as witnessed by the artists' angels rather incredulously, artistic licence there(!); is incredibly important though. The act of wishing to be baptised just like everyone else shows us Jesus' humility and his humanity. God's breaking into the situation gives him a blessing he perhaps did not expect. We will do well to remember that for ourselves as we embark on this new year not knowing quite what the future holds for us.

At the moment of Jesus' baptism something quite extraordinary happens as the Spirit descends like a dove and a voice is heard. As he comes up from the water he sees the heavens torn apart. The Greek words are more explicit and translates this phrase as 'in the process of being torn apart'. This same verb is used later in this gospel when Jesus dies and the curtain in the Temple is torn apart. This is language which is telling us that this moment of Jesus' baptism is a massive cosmic event. It changes heaven and earth. The division between the two is gone. God is come down from heaven in the form of Christ. This voice from heaven gives Jesus assurance of who he is and how the Father sees him. He tells Jesus "you are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased".

Baptism is all about new beginnings whether we were baptised as an infant or an adult or perhaps you have not ever been baptised but are thinking about making a new beginning with God? Baptism and or confirmation may be the next step for you as you begin your journey. However or wherever we wish to make a new beginning with God - God meets us where we are, accepts us as we are and reminds us that wherever we may go, whatever we may do or have done to us, God loves us, accepts us and holds onto us.

This assurance is lived out by Jesus throughout his ministry and Mark will unfold this through the events of his gospel as we see how Jesus lived out this identity. His words and deeds are seen and heard by others who will also come to understand what they mean. We are children of God, because that's who God says we are. Not through any good works of ours, no because this is God's grace, God's gift to us.

To return back to the painting Jesus stands still to receive all that God the Father gives him. As God's children, perhaps we might find time today to stand still today, to receive all the grace that God wishes to pour into our lives.

As Jesus demonstrated the truth of his baptism through his life and work and his ultimate sacrifice for us, as he dies on the cross remember the words of

the centurion who echoes God's words almost, as he says aloud 'Truly this man was God's Son!' I pray that as we enter another new phase of our lives, a new year, that our lives may be spent in generosity and freedom in Christ, knowing that when the world began as told in Genesis our first reading, even though there appeared to be nothingness, light came out of the darkness and God brought order out of the waters of chaos. Therefore in these dark days of Epiphany let us remember whose we are and how God's power can bring healing, goodness and transformation out of the most dire of circumstances. How much more then can be achieved if we too may through our words and deeds demonstrate the truth of our own baptisms - for we are all children of God!

Amen.