

8 January 2012, Baptism of Christ Matins 10.00

Psalm 29; 1 Samuel 16.1-3,13; John 1.29-34

+ And John testified, “I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him”. (John 1: 32)

In her recent autobiography – *Why be happy when you could be normal?* – Jeanette Winterson says rather less about the religious side of her upbringing by adoptive parents than she did in her first, semi-autobiographical novel, *Oranges are not the only fruit*. Yet she does provide a description of the Elim Pentecostal church in Accrington, which was made the centre of her life for sixteen years:

It had no pews, no altar, no nave or chancel, no stained glass, no candles, no organ.

It had fold-up wooden chairs, a long low pulpit – more like a stage than the traditional box on stilts – a pub piano and a pit.

The pit could be filled up with water for our baptismal services. Just as Jesus had baptised his disciples in the River Jordan, so we too fully immersed believers in a deep warm plunge pool which had to be slowly heated up the day before the service.¹

The idea of total immersion tends to make those Christians who belong to denominations that don't practise it feel more than a bit nervous. Of course we know the gospel stories about Christ's baptism in the Jordan that describe Jesus as fully immersed in the river: the accounts in Mark and Matthew that tell of the Spirit descending from the heavens ‘just as Jesus was coming up out of the water’ (Mark 1: 10; Matthew 3: 16). We are equally familiar with narratives of other baptisms in Acts, such as Philip's baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8: 36-39) and with medieval accounts of the mass baptism of large numbers of new converts in rivers, all also involving total immersion. But it is no longer universally thought necessary to re-enact Christ's baptism so literally. Our Anglican ritual uses water more symbolically, pouring it gently over a small portion of the head of the new convert, whether adult or baby.

With our own, sanitised, mostly dry version of baptism, we respond readily to the famous painting of the baptism of Christ by Piero della Francesca now in the National Gallery:

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/piero-della-francesca-the-baptism-of-christ> .

Piero's arched image was originally the central section of an altarpiece designed for the church of his home town in Tuscany and may have been painted in the 1440s or 1450s. In the centre of the picture Jesus stands prayerfully, his hands clasped, his eyes open but cast down. On his left – so to the right of the image – we see John the Baptist in profile, standing on his right leg, balanced by his raised left leg and arm held out across his body, as he raises his right hand holding a small bowl over the head of his slightly taller cousin. As we watch, John is in the act of pouring, and the water flows onto Jesus's hair, which is damp at the front. So carefully is the Baptist drawn that no part of him, not his right arm with the bowl of water, nor his other arm, conceal any part of the body of our Lord. Jesus is at the heart of this picture, at the heart of the story it tells of his baptism and of his manifestation as the Messiah.

¹ J. Winterson, *Why be happy when you could be normal?* (Jonathan Cape, 2011), p. 65.

Our eyes notice immediately the verticals in the image: just above Jesus' head, what we might first have thought to be one of the clouds turns out, on closer inspection, to be the dove representing the Holy Spirit, come down from the opened heaven. It hovers with wings stretched out, facing towards us, aligned exactly above the trickle of water, which is in line with Christ's divided beard, his praying hands and his navel. The straight tree trunk to Jesus' left is also vertical, as are the three figures – angels dressed in red, white and blue – who stand under the tree holding hands and watching.

But what strikes me, if we follow the central vertical line down to the ground in between Christ's feet is that Jesus is not in the water; he doesn't even have water lapping at his heels: he is standing on dry ground; the River Jordan lies behind him, flowing away to the back of the picture. In conventional Byzantine art, Jesus is shown naked for his baptism, waist deep in the waters of the river, which are often depicted as waves, partly concealing his nakedness. Yet here in Piero della Francesca's painting he is partly dressed and almost completely dry. Was he really never in the water? Surely not. Rather at the moment of his baptism by John, the Jordan has receded leaving the river bed miraculously dry. Is this, too, meant to represent part of the manifestation of Jesus, the revelation that he is the Messiah, the Son of God?

In our second reading this morning we did not hear any of the synoptic gospel accounts of John's actions in baptising Jesus, or the voice from heaven that spoke saying, 'You are my son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased.' Instead we had from John's gospel the Baptist's own description of what he had done, part of the larger narrative that begins 'This is the testimony given by John' (John 1: 19) in which John is the first witness to Jesus as the Messiah. Having seen Jesus coming towards him, and testified to his identity by declaring 'Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world', John went on to recall the occasion of his baptism, which was when Jesus's identity was first revealed to him. For he says twice in this short passage: 'I myself did not know him' (John 1: 31, 33). He reports that revelation not as news, but as reminiscence: 'I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him'; 'I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God' (John 1: 32, 34).

Calling Jesus, Son of God, the Baptist was made to echo phrases that had come earlier in this first chapter of John's gospel: 'And we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth' (John 1: 16) and 'No one has seen God. It is God the only son who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.' (1: 18) This is the anointed, royal figure who will fulfil the promises made to Israel. Rather than the voice from heaven speaking, as the dove hovered over Christ's head, in the fourth gospel John the Baptist himself becomes the witness, telling those who read and hear the text about the distinctiveness of Christ.

In his painting of Jesus' baptism, Piero della Francesca shows both those who heard, understood and testified to Jesus' identity as revealed on that occasion, but also those who could or would not hear. Beside Jesus, under the tree, stood the three angels who in conventional iconography accompany the epiphany of the Son of God at his baptism. They hold ready the clothes that he will wear in his new life, which according to the synoptic accounts begins directly with his forty days in the desert. Behind the figure of John the Baptist is another man, however, waiting his turn for his own baptism, shown bending

forward in the act of taking his robe over his head. He sees and hears nothing, as his eyes are covered, his ears muffled by the fabric of the clothes out of which he is struggling. Does he symbolise the crowds of the faithful who readily accepted John the Baptist's message of repentance and were baptised, yet failed to see that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God? And who are the figures dressed in Greek clothing whom we see as if through a window framed by the bent body of the partially unclothed man? They seem surprised: at what they can hear and see, or perhaps their amazement is at the receding water of the Jordan.

The symbolism of the dried river surely reflects the fulfilment of the story of Exodus. The ancient people of God wandered for 40 years in the wilderness before they crossed the river Jordan after the death of Moses to enter the Promised Land. So, too, Jesus comes to the Jordan. Once the former man in him has died at his baptism, so the new man, the second Adam, the Messiah, the son of God, will step out of the river on the dry land, ready to cross the Jordan into the same wilderness from which the Jewish people had come.

In our own baptism we make that same crossing through the water; in baptism we die with Jesus to be born to new life in him. Baptised with water and the Holy Spirit, we pass over from death to life, entering our own inheritance, not into a land flowing with milk and honey, but into the gifts promised to us through life in Christ. Since baptism is one of the two great dominical sacraments instituted by Christ himself, one of the principal sacraments necessary for salvation, we do well to reflect on its significance. And we could profitably do so more often than on this Sunday when we recall the baptism of Christ, or on Easter Eve when we renew our baptismal vows, or on the rare occasions when baptisms are performed during the Sunday Eucharist.

This brings me to a polemical conclusion for which I do not apologise. Preaching on this Sunday two years ago I said that this cathedral needs a font. I still believe we need one, not just as the living sign of new life and new birth in Christ, a reminder to all who visit and worship here of the waters that wash us of our sins, but as a challenge and provocation to all believers. A font makes us reflect on whether we are truly walking in the newness of life, living as true disciples. When we have baptisms in the Cathedral, we do not need to watch the total immersion of new believers in a baptismal pool; we can all keep our feet safely dry on Jordan's bank. But we do need that daily reminder that in the waters of our baptism with the Holy Spirit, we were brought to Christ; as St Paul wrote to the Corinthians: 'in that one Spirit, we were all baptised into one body' (I Cor 12:13). The Baptist's call to repentance is a call to us also, an injunction to throw off the old life and embrace the new, to respond to God's invitation, and let him take us by the hand and lead us through the waters, secure in his enduring love. Both reminiscent and admonitory, a font symbolises our acceptance of that call, our transition from death to life in Christ. And in one of the great cathedrals of this land it is time – more than time – to make that symbol real.