13 January 2019: Choral Matins
The Baptism of Christ
Isaiah 42:1–9, Acts 19:1–7

The Revd Canon Grant Bayliss, Diocesan Canon Precentor

“Into what then were you baptized?”

In the name…

If I were to ask you what the most important parts of your faith are, what bible stories you couldn’t be a Christian without, I wonder what you would choose. Perhaps the Christmas stories of Jesus’ birth, of shepherds and wise men; maybe the Cross and Resurrection, from passion to the empty tomb.

I wonder how many of you would emphasise the Holy Spirit, which came as such a surprise to those believers from Ephesus that Paul met in our second reading. I wonder how many of you would pick out the baptism of Jesus, which we celebrate today.

But 1750 years ago someone did. A Roman sculptor, designing sarcophagi for the burials of wealthy Christians in the capital, picked out eight key motifs to say something of the faith of those who commissioned him. And right at their heart we find a somewhat unfamiliar image of Christ being baptised.

On your pew sheet you’ll see a photo of this third-century Roman sarcophagus, found beneath the church of Sta Maria Antiqua. And there, at the far left hand end stands a bearded John the Baptist on the bank of river Jordan, laying his hands in prayer upon the head of a naked Jesus, the waters lapping at his feet. Above Christ, the Holy Spirit
appears in the form of a dove and we can imagine the moment in the Gospels when the voice of the Father from heaven declares – “This is my son, the beloved” (Mt. 3:17).

It’s the second of the great Epiphany manifestations of Christ as the Son of God, the Word made flesh – a moment of revelation, of theophany. For many later Western painters it would become a scene to bring out the sense of Trinitarian revelation, highlighting the dynamic between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But here the artist is doing something different. Rather than making this moment of epiphany primarily about God, the sculptor has made it primarily about us and about the anonymous Christian to whom he intended to sell this work.

The first clue is in the portrayal of Christ. With our modern iconographic sensibilities, we might expect a bearded Jesus but the smooth youth-like features are typical of this period when Christ was almost always depicted as fresh-faced and with curls. The diminutive stature is unusual though. In depictions of the rest of Christ’s ministry on sarcophagi, mosaics and frescoes, Christ is shown normal-sized as a fully-grown man, yet in many of the earliest depictions of his baptism, he is portrayed, as here, as child-like and in clear contrast to his fully-grown cousin, John the Baptist.

This is no accident but part of a common programme of eliding the biblical story of Jesus’ baptism with the regular baptismal practice of the churches of the third and fourth centuries – the size of the Christ-figure, the hand gesture of John the Baptist, the stripping naked all point us to the message that there is an epiphany, a revelation of the Christian life happening here, as much as a revelation of the divine life.

The second clue is in the context. Across the sarcophagus we have a complex non-narrative series of scenes. At the far left, just out of shot is a Greco-Roman river god with trident, reclining on waves which carry Jonah’s ship fleeing to Tarshish (Jonah 1:3). You can just see the big fish, here portrayed as a chaos monster, ready to spew forth Jonah onto the beach (Jonah 2:10). But you’d be forgiven for not recognising the figure happily reclining under the tree as Jonah beneath his gourd from the end of the story (Jonah 4:6). For here as in many third and fourth century representations of the Jonah cycle, the prophet has been depicted in the posture of the much better known pagan hero, Endymion, who was carried off by the goddess Selene. The central figures, probably originally intended to be carved with the faces of the husband and wife who would buy this work, are again shown in classical poses that are being given new Christian significance: the woman as the orant, a praying figure, associated with deliverance, and
the man as the philosopher, connected in Christian circles to the student or teacher of the law and Gospel. To the right we see the classic Hellenistic carving of a shepherd carrying a ram, not only a pastoral figure but one often associated with Hermes as a psychopomp, leading the souls of the dead to the afterlife – an image that would be hugely popular in Christian art until the fifth century, when it largely vanished for several hundred years. It’s not hard to see the Christian connections to the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:3–7) and Jesus’ own designation as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). However, it’s likely that it also tied to Psalm 23 and other liturgical texts used at ancient baptisms which depicted the candidates as sheep becoming part of the Shepherd’s flock.

Beyond the scene of Jesus’ baptism, we find fishermen at work, casting their nets. Perhaps it hints at the breakfast on the beach, Jesus resurrection appearance and the great catch of fish (John 21:1–8), but certainly it cannot help but recall Jesus’ first calling of his disciples – “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men” (Matthew 4:19).

Like many such examples of early church art, only one image here – that of the baptism itself – would have seemed odd or unfamiliar to non-believers. But together in this sequence, these carvings say something very different than their Hellenistic counter-parts. They tell us into what these Christians were baptised – a rich theology of baptism as hope in the face of death.

For as we heard in our reading from Acts, being baptized is not simply a matter of repentance and symbolic washing in water. That was the baptism of John, the only sort known to the small community Paul found in Ephesus. Christian baptism was, and is, something more: the gift of the Holy Spirit, a real, metaphysical incorporation into Christ, and a commissioning for ministry and mission in the world. It is salvation from the whale, the waters of chaos, and the world of false gods; it is deliverance into paradise beneath the tree; it is prayer and wisdom; it is becoming part of Christ’s flock; it is becoming his disciple, fishing for others to save from the dangers of the world.

Martin Luther famously declared, “A truly Christian life is nothing else than a daily baptism, once begun and ever to be continued”. Our artist wanted to say the same about Christian death. Christ’s baptism was not just an epiphany of who he is but of who we might be – if we live and move and have our being in him; not just as creator but as redeemer and sanctifier of life. We are not just his flock for a little while on earth, but for the whole of eternal life.
Jesus’ baptism does not just show us that God is with us, living a human life two thousand years ago in a distant land, it shows us that we are with God here and now. So let us live that out. Let us remember into what we are baptised, that in the midst of life or of death, we are God’s flock, anointed by his Holy Spirit, saved in order to bring light and hope to others.