



Sunday Reflection

Season of Epiphany

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 10 January 2021

Baptism of the Lord

Epiphany 1

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus Christ. It is a moment in time that reveals who he is. In that light we remember our own baptisms, which reveal who we are: children of God.

Reflection for this week's Gospel

"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." Mark 1:11

An Illustration to set the scene

Around 1437 the Italian artist Piero della Francesca painted an image of the baptism of Christ for a small chapel in his home town in Tuscany. His painting now hangs in London's National Gallery. Its extraordinary perspective still has a power to stop us in our tracks.

The painting shows Jesus standing in the River Jordan, while John the Baptist pours water over his head from a bowl. Three angels



look on, their faces showing an appalled wonder. The Holy Spirit, in the form of a perfect dove with huge wings, hovers over Jesus.

The clouds in the blue sky reflect the dove's shape and draw our eyes towards heaven, which is itself reflected in the clear waters. Just to the right a young man takes off his robe in preparation for his own baptism. In the background are the hills and towns of Tuscany.

A large tree almost frames the whole event, reminding us of the tree of life from the garden of Eden, as well as the tree of crucifixion. The painting helps us understand that the baptism of Christ was a moment when heaven and earth came together and Christ's humanity and ours united.

As the River Jordan is painted at the foot of the Tuscan hills, so we see that Jesus' baptism is not simply an interesting biblical fact – it is also about our own lives and our own places.

Looking at the teaching of the Gospel

Mark's account of the baptism of Christ establishes both the identity of Jesus – he is the Son of God – and also his authority – he is the one who comes after John the Baptist, who is more powerful than him. It also locates Jesus in a particular place – Nazareth. This physical location is important, for it helps us to see that Jesus is totally human, living in a real place, breathing the air and walking the land, just as everyone else does.

Mark begins his Gospel by telling us about the preparation for Jesus Christ. He doesn't tell us about Mary and Joseph and the birth in Bethlehem – instead he tells us about John the Baptist and his message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. All the time he is pointing to Jesus, the one who will come after him: John the Baptist was a prophet, but Jesus is the Saviour.

At the moment of Jesus' baptism, something extraordinary happens. Mark suggests it is only Jesus who sees and hears it. As he comes up from the water he sees the heavens torn apart. The Greek words are more striking than the English translation – he sees them “in the process of being torn apart”. The same verb is used later in Mark's Gospel (15:38), when Jesus dies and the curtain in the Temple is torn apart. The language tells us that this moment of Jesus' baptism is of huge cosmic significance. It changes heaven and earth. The division between the two is gone.

The voice from heaven assures Jesus of who he is and of how the Father sees him. The rest of Mark's Gospel will tell how Jesus lived out this identity. His words and his deeds will be heard and seen by others who will come to understand what they mean. Almost at the end of this Gospel (15:39), as Jesus dies on the cross, a centurion echoes those words he heard first at his baptism: “Truly this man was God's Son!” The life of Jesus has demonstrated the truth of his baptism.

How can we reflect on the application to our lives?

What does all this mean for us, who seek to follow the way of Jesus thousands of years later?

Just as Jesus' baptism assured him of who he was, so our baptisms, whether as babies or adults, tell us who we are.

We are children of God, purely because that's who God says we are. That is the power of baptism.

In the painting, Jesus stands still to receive all that God the Father gives him. As God's children, may we too stand still today, to receive all the grace God pours into our lives. Confident of that grace, may our lives, spent in generosity and freedom,

demonstrate the truth of our own baptisms: for we are children of God.

“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.” Mark 1:11

Please share your response to this reflection to Rector@SECStJohnStMargaret.org.uk – did anything speak to you? Did you feel challenged, angered, consoled by something in the words? How did God’ spirit move you as you read it? Have you shared the words with someone else? Is this a worthwhile thing to make available to folk whilst we cannot meet for corporate worship to share in word and sacrament? What are your thoughts?

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