

Sermon Feast of the Baptism of the Lord 2022

In the popular imagination, or least the popular imagination of most Christians, the baptism of our Lord appears as something like a commencement ceremony, a formal beginning of Christ's public ministry. And, with the voice from heaven itself, this appears to be so. Divine assent is given to both Jesus emerging out of his decades of obscurity, and to the ministry about to unfold. Without doubt both these ideas are true. The various gospel accounts of the baptism of Jesus do note divine assent, and it is a commencement. But we celebrate the baptism of our Lord as way of *concluding* our Christmas celebrations, and so ought to serve as a signal to us that perhaps there is something else is going on here.

It may seem somewhat peculiar (and perhaps artificial) to squeeze this incident from Christ's life into the events surrounding his birth, infancy and childhood. But in the spiritual imagination of the early church, it made perfect sense to associate the events from Christ's birth and childhood to that of his baptism. Because all were understood as *manifestations*. The birth of Christ, his appearing to the wise men, and the baptism were all and equally *epiphanies* – God in Christ showing/manifesting something of his saving mystery to the world. In other words, these key moments all introduce key aspects of the person and nature of Christ. And so, for this reason, from the earliest of centuries, these mysteries were *also* connected to the miracle at Cana, (which we will hear of next week). The Magnificat antiphon for the traditional office of vespers for the feast of the Epiphany brings home the point: *Three mysteries mark this holy day: today the star leads the Magi to the infant Christ; today water is changed into wine for the wedding feast; today Christ wills to be baptized by John in the river Jordan to bring us salvation.* Different moments just various facets of the one truth.

So, we miss a key aspect of this feast, and key aspects from this moment of Christ's life, if we simply see it as kind of inauguration, as just the 'commencement' of his public ministry. Something more is going on here. Christ stepping forward to be baptized by John is *showing forth* something, *manifesting* something. The obvious answer is of course what the voice from heaven declares, *you my Son the beloved, my favour rests on you.* But the gospel writer Luke, by a couple of important details - namely some of Israel's ancient stories which form the backdrop to the gospel account, and the very element of water itself, and the interplay between them both – highlight what exactly is being manifested in Christ's baptism.

From elsewhere in the gospels and earlier in chapter three of Luke's gospel, we know John baptized at the Jordan, the only significant river in all of what was known as Judea. Again, a detail easily lost. But John could have selected any stream or lake or well or pond to enact his ministry. But no. Instead, it was the Jordan. And it is to the Jordan our Lord comes. And to understand why we must go back to the book of Joshua. Moses's successor, Joshua, was the one who finally led the people of God out of their troubles, out of their 40 years wandering in the wilderness into the Promised Land. And this was enacted - symbolically and actually - by *crossing over* the river Jordan. Israel leaves their old life behind - the life of slavery, the life of wandering - precisely *by crossing the river*. It is surely this memory John recalls in his ministry of baptism. Ritual washing was well known in the Judaism of the first century. But John's baptism was not merely a ritual bath for purification. It was a baptism of repentance. A baptism for the forgiveness of sins. In other words, a baptism of 'crossing over', of leaving behind an old life. And by Our Lord submitting to this baptism, he indicates how through his own person, and through his work and ministry, he will bring God's people to the land of promise.

The actual ritual of baptism reinforces this. Yes, by association with the Jordan. But also, by *immersion* into the waters. It cannot be overstated, but this is a symbol of death, of the dangerous and destructive power of water. The genteel manner by which most baptisms are celebrated in the church only undermines this central aspect of baptism in water: *that water can kill!* But that is exactly the point of course: that old life - that old life of sin and slavery and of wandering - must be killed! And so, importantly, even Jesus' baptism speaks of his death.

Which brings us to the second Old Testament narrative intricately bound the story of our Lord's baptism: that of the great flood, Noah's flood. *That* story gives perfect expression to the destructive, annihilating power of water. And it simply reinforces the Jordan narrative: new life, life in the land of promise comes by passing through the destructive waters. Noah's flood, of course, is understood as a *cleansing flood*. And the appearance of the Spirit in the form of a dove yet a further connection to the story. A symbol of peace, yes. Christ's life and his death, win peace for the human family. And just as in Genesis God announced to Noah that the destruction was over, that a new life could begin, the message here is the same: in Christ, life commences again.

And so, it is both Christ entering into the waters of the Jordan *and* the presence of the dove which tells us what is really going on here. Because, of course, Jesus did not have to submit to the baptism of John for the forgiveness of sins. There is no old life he has to turn from. *He* does not need to begin again. But his submitting to John's baptism is his signal that the Land of Promise now opens up to all, and that the universal flood of destruction is over, that the weight and penalty of human sin, is to be dealt with.

And just as Noah's flood covered the whole earth, so the universal aspect of Christ's mission is key to this scene. The idea is further stressed by the Evangelist Luke who, you will remember, placed our Lord's birth in the context of the world stage. He announces that Jesus' birth occurs 'in the reign of Caesar Augustus'. The same point is made at the start of the baptism narrative which we heard a few weeks ago in mid Advent as we were introduced to John's ministry, *Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judaea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of Ituraea and of the region of Trachonitis, and Lysanias the tetrarch of Abilene, Annas and Caiaphas being the high priests, the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharias in the wilderness.* Christ's life plays out on a world stage. We are not meant to understand Jesus' ministry as taking place in some sort of mythical 'anytime' which can mean always or never. It is saving, and has real impact on us, *precisely because* it is a datable historical event having the full weight that real historical happenings have!

This marvelous feast celebrates how the flood of human sin which covers the whole world, is reversed by a baptism that plays out on a world stage. The point finally made by the very nature of seas and oceans and rivers: they cannot be contained! They spread and flow! For the feast of the Epiphany, our brothers and sisters of the eastern churches - who have more thoroughly maintained the connection between Epiphany and Baptism - bless water, for the faithful to take home and bless houses. And at nearby rivers or lakes or seas a cross is cast into the waters. The fit young men eagerly jump of piers and harbours and jetties seeking to reclaim this prized cross. The point being that Christ's saving work flows out to all the world! This is the manifestation. This is the epiphany. The ministry which commences on the banks of the Jordan, and the voice which gives it divine assent, culminates in Christ's saving death. It ends the flood. It wins us peace. It leads us to the land of promise. And it has universal consequence. His saving work covers the whole earth. Amen.