

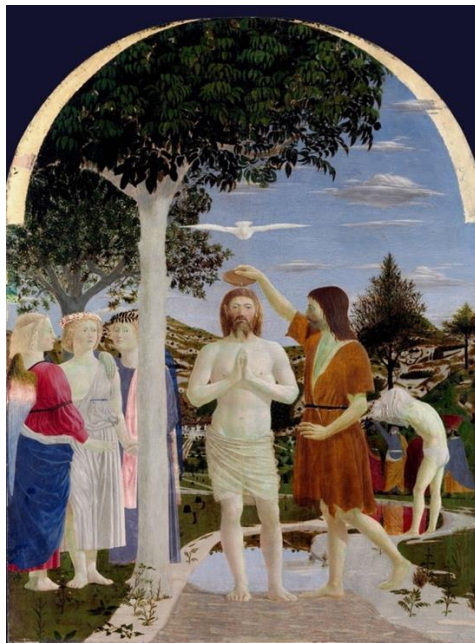


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Sermon at Gray's Inn Chapel on Sunday 18th February 2024 – the First Sunday of Lent

Revd Stephen Baxter

Text: Mark 1:9-14



The Baptism of Christ, Piero della Francesca (c.1415 1492)

In these first days of Lent, the gospel takes us to the baptism of Jesus – to the commissioning of the one whose cross looms over us and inspires us through this precious time of reflection and self-examination. Jesus approaches his cousin John requesting baptism in the Jordan following the example of many who have already come to John for the rite of baptism.

The early church had a real problem with the baptism of Jesus because they couldn't comprehend why the perfect, sinless Son of God required a baptism seen as involving cleansing and repentance. Jesus requests baptism to identify fully with humanity. To be fully alongside us.

The baptism represents the commissioning of Jesus for action – it is director's clapper board snapping, the green light at the start of a grand prix – game on in the words of the darts commentators.

And it's a joint commissioning – the baptism of water by John who represents the line of Jewish prophets and the baptism by his Father whose spirit descends upon him and who tenderly assures him of his fatherly love and pride. The spirit of God that hovered over the waters of chaos at the start of creation now hovers over God's new creation launched through his son.

The depiction of the baptism by Piero was painted for the abbey in his native San Sepulcro in central Italy and now hangs in the National Gallery. It's worth spending some time in front of it. It has a deep serenity – time appears to have stood still with the cosmic significance of the event – the brightness of the figures providing an ethereal, transcendent other-worldly aspect. It is incidentally the favourite painting of the painter David Hockney who used to have a copy of it pinned up in his studio. There are of course many ways of interpreting the baptism and as homework, perhaps have a look at El Greco's baptism, which rather than focusing on serenity, emphasising the dynamic, electric connection of heaven and earth meeting.

Piero's interpretation is well known for its extensive symbolism and the geometric precision of the lines and triangles within the composition. At the very centre is the dominant line created by the dove lined up with the water falling from John's shell and lined up the centre of the beard and praying hands of Jesus – baptism by water and the spirit combine to prepare Jesus who is absolutely central and unusually seen face-on, rather than side-on.

At the time of Jesus, the Jordan was a prominent flowing river probably 50-100 feet wide depending on the season. It was a defined boundary and barrier. Yet in Piero's painting the mighty Jordan the great barrier to be crossed has all but dried up and looks more like the Swilken Burn that wanders across the first and 18th fairways at St Andrews – certainly not sufficient for the full immersion that would have been the

baptismal method of the vigorous and somewhat scary John who would have thrust baptismal candidates under the water for quite a while before they emerged spluttering for air.

The significance of the presentation of the Jordan drying up is that with the activation of the ministry of Jesus, boundaries are removed. Energised by the Spirit of God and encouraged by the loving word of God Jesus transcends all religious, ethnic, social barriers and leads his people into the new Promised Land – his kingdom where all have the joint identity of being One in Christ.

Just before Lockdown, I had the privilege of visiting the place where it is believed that Jesus was baptised. The River Jordan has shrunk significantly such that it is really now only a stream as much of the water is diverted for agriculture and domestic use further up the Jordan Valley. Yet it is a barrier - the border between the countries of Jordan and Israel runs down the middle of the stream and there are pavilions on both sides of the stream for pilgrims to gather and enter the waters – some go for full immersion, others like me a little more Anglican paddle and flick a little water over heads. Noticeably armed Israeli guards markedly patrol to make sure that no one crosses the stream of Jordan into Israel. A sad, poetic comment on our tendency to create establish barriers on the spot where the God commissioned his Son to bring universal salvation.

Boundary shattering and universal salvation that is achieved by the cross which is represented in Piero's painting by the walnut tree that frames the baptism. Some believe the cross was made of walnut wood. The cross is the ultimate sign of God's limitless love and compassion - the boundless mercy that we have just sung about in the wonderful hymn by Father Faber:

But we make his love too narrow by false limits of our own
And we magnify his strictness by a zeal he would not own.

From the cross forgiveness gushes forth. Forgiveness for the times when we turn away from or fail to turn to God's light. The Greek for to forgive also means to liberate. Being merciful and forgiving enables us not to be held captive to thoughts of

anger and desire for getting even winning retribution. Forgiveness is the higher way because it is the way of God. We receive it; we must pass it on.

Applying God's principles of mercy and forgiveness in action can be powerfully transforming. In what seemed like intractable conflicts in South Africa and Northern Ireland, acts of forgiveness were instrumental in transcending boundaries and making progress.

In South Africa, the emphasis on personal forgiveness at the heart of Nelson Mandela's mission was critical in diffusing the great risk of violent confrontation after the collapse of apartheid.

On 8 November 1987 a bomb planted by the IRA exploded during Enniskillen's Remembrance Day parade injuring Gordon Wilson and killing his daughter.

It is recognised that Wilson's reaction to the death of his daughter was pivotal to the change in attitude in Northern Ireland and the collective determination for peace. He publicly forgave the bombers and said he would pray for them. He also begged that no-one took revenge for Marie's death.

We pray that the leaders of the Israelis and Palestinians and those who advise them will be converted to similar ways of mercy and forgiveness. Not forgetting; not denial; but the power to take the higher road of forgiveness, seek equitable solutions to move forward.

Words from Martin Luther King: Forgiveness does not mean ignoring what has been done or putting a false label on an evil act. It means rather, that the evil act no longer remains as a barrier to the relationship. Forgiveness is a catalyst creating the atmosphere necessary for a fresh start and a new beginning. May the Palestinians and Israelis know such a new beginning.

Lent comes from the Old English word for spring, the time of new life. Enhanced perhaps by times of precious silence and reflection, Lent is an opportunity to reflect

on the power of forgiveness, the power of liberation, the power of removing destructive barriers that inhibit the flourishing of life and peace.