

Homily for the Feast of the Baptism of Jesus



Walking through the National Gallery in London, as you turn into one room you are hit by the sight on the far wall of Piero della Francesca's painting of Jesus' baptism. It hangs alone, and though no one is looking out of the picture, directly at you, it seems to draw you to it. Remember that these artists were working for churches and Catholic leaders of society, and the painting had to hold a message, a gospel message. Just like a gospel, the painting was trying to teach the viewer about Jesus, if only because so many of the public could not read.

Jesus stands in the middle of the painting, John the Baptist to one side. Three angels are on the left, introducing us to the fact that God is directly involved here. Behind the two human figures is another young man, taking off his clothes, getting ready to be baptised. Showing us that Jesus was one among many.

But, using perspective for almost the first time, the artist focuses us on the centre of the painting. At Jesus' feet is the River Jordan, which appears to be about as empty as it is now. (If you have been to the Jordan you will know that there only a few special sites where the water is deep enough to get into, which are full of Christians of all sorts renewing their baptism, the rest of the water having been siphoned off.) This is the river, the Jordan, the Israelites had to cross to enter the Promised Land; that Moses who lead them through the Red Sea in the Israelites' initiation to freedom, was not allowed to cross because of his failure to trust God. All the imagery is to do with baptism and renewal. Jesus is painted as one who is more important than Moses.

But in the picture, far from being proud of this, or seen as a great leader, Jesus is modest and humble with his eyes down. Above him comes the reason for his humility. Firstly because he is accepting baptism from John, which in the painting is done as Medieval people and we would expect, with a cup pouring water over Jesus' head. The artist is reminding people that this scene is about them and their baptism too. Then the line of the painting takes us upwards to where the real power in the painting lies,

and this is the dove, the Holy Spirit. The dove hovers over Jesus, just as the glory of God hovered over the Ark in the Old Testament, and then it settles in the Ark. Jesus is to be that Ark of glory, the Ark that makes the glory of God present.

A painting cannot speak, at least not directly. But through the presence of the angels and the Spirit, we can see that God is here, even if we cannot hear those words, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved, my favour rests on you.’

The evangelist is showing us that the journey of the Christian is more than a journey through this world.

Jesus could be just a good man who through his life and example guides us in how to lead a better life, as better people. By his death he would simply be showing us that good innocent people do die unjustly in this world, that is part of life.

But as we know that is only part of the story. The fact that God enters into the picture as a dove, and in the gospel as dove and with the words of the Father, show us that Jesus’ journey is taking us to much more extraordinary, supernatural, places. That Jesus’ goal is beyond the narrow horizons of this world. That understanding this opens up our eyes, our vision, to a new vision of this world, of the whole of Creation, and God’s plan for it and all of us. This is where the gospel will take us.

The second reading agrees that water and the Holy Spirit are essential elements, but adds another. The outpouring of Jesus’ blood will open another door, that of eternal life.

With baptism we have to enter, do enter, into this death of Christ too as we do with all sacraments, to share in the freedom it offers.

If this is done then our own death is no longer a barrier, or end, but a stage, as once we accept the gift of baptism we are already part of God’s life.

Who shares in this? Can share? Do you remember the young man getting undressed behind Jesus? Taking his clothes off before he gets into the water. The water poured over his head too as in our own baptism?

That young man is all of us if we choose to follow Jesus into the water. The painting and the gospel are an invitation from God the Father, “Do you wish to be my Beloved children?”