

The Baptism of our Lord offers perhaps the greatest or clearest manifestation of God as God the Holy Trinity in the Gospels. God is one and simple, and yet this unity is ‘not solitude enclosed in itself but rather fullness of communication and communion’<sup>1</sup>: the Father speaks, the Spirit descends, the Son is manifest: You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” This three-ness is not an alienating separateness, but the complete gift of one person to the other in an exchange of being, knowing, and loving. In the Baptism and Theophany of our Lord we see God manifest as Love, a love perfect and complete in itself, and a love which searches out humanity battered or assaulted by violence, humanity wearies by struggle, and humanity gone astray.

This is not just an account of him, but of us-

We don’t just see Trinity, we live in trinity, Trinity manifest is our hom  
-baptised in name of trinity

When we read psalms, we pray Trinity

-so many of our prayers evoke the Trinity

-going out and coming in, we make sign of the Trinity

-the proclamation not just for Christ, but for us-we live in this  
manifestation

One of the differences between the way the Baptism is presented in art in the East and West can help us to appreciate different aspects of the day. In Eastern Orthodox Icons or frescoes, the right hand of Christ is usually

---

<sup>1</sup> Rt Revd Richard Chartres, Address to the *Star Course* at Andrew's Fulham Fields

slightly raised, or more conspicuously raised, in an act of blessing. This emphasizes that in coming to be baptised, Christ himself is conducting a kind of baptism. IN descending into the Jordan, Christ baptizes all water. In the words of an orthodox prayer

‘Today the waters of the Jordan are transformed into healing by the coming of the Lord. Today, the whole creation is watered by mystical streams. Today the transgression of men are washed away by the waters of Jordan. Today Paradise has been open to men and the Sun of Righteousness shines down upon us.’

In His baptism, Christ gives to water its perfection, its proper end. The way in which water is necessary for all life, so that it is a symbol of life, a basic ingredient of life, all of this points to the higher purpose which is brought to perfection or completion in Christ. Water offers not only the gift of natural life, but becomes a spring welling up to eternal life. The Baptism of Christ is a great festival because in it we see summed up in condensed form the promise of a new creation. In the beginning of the first creation, the Father speaks the Son or the Word, and the Spirit moves on the face of the waters. At the beginning of the new creation, the Father of God speaks to the Son on whom the Spirit descends. To be baptised in Christ is to participate in this new creation.

Whereas the Eastern presentations, in icons and frescos, emphasize the role of Christ as the one who blesses and baptises water, in the paintings and stained glass of the West, Christ often has hands together in prayer.<sup>2</sup> Here, he is presented not so much as the author of a new creation, but as the model for our own baptisms.

---

<sup>2</sup> Lincoln college glass, interesting exception, a bit like Giotto Scrovegni Chapel, a memory of the East, or gesture of receptivity?

Paraodox

one who is fully God, who as God and Man was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother’s womb’ receives gift of Spirit—manifestation, but also taking up of humanity into divinity

Why does the only one who was tempted but remained without sin submit to a baptism which proclaims a public repentance of sin? The basic message of the Scriptural witness and the tradition is expressed in the enigmatic words of the Saviour to the Baptist in St Matthew’s Gospel: *‘thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness’*. Christ did not die on the cross for Himself, and He was not baptized for Himself. He was baptized on behalf and for his body which is not yet born, for the Church. Christ is the first fruits of new creation – baptism for us.

In descending on Christ the Holy Spirit descends on all who will be baptised in Him. In a beautiful and evocative passage St Irenaeus wrote that the Holy Spirit descended upon the Son of God who became also the Son of Man to ‘accustom Himself in Christ to dwell in the human race, to abide in humanity, and to dwell in the work of God, working the will of the Father in them, and renewing them from their decay to the newness of Christ’.<sup>3</sup> With his hands together in prayer, Christ is pictured as the model of human receptivity. Because he clothed Himself in human nature we may be clothed in robe of the righteousness and goodness of Christ. In baptism, we do not contemplate God the Holy Trinity from the outside, but we are taken up into the divine life. The praying hands of Christ

---

<sup>3</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 3.17.1, in Pusey, Tract 67, 4<sup>th</sup> edn, 282

picture the attitude of receptivity which is embodied in the service of baptism, it is the longing for renewal which is promised whether it is an infant or an adult who comes to the waters.

Christ blessing, Christ, hands together in prayer

-Christ author of new creation, men Jesus , beginning of new creation

--Christ baptised not for himself but for us,

A new principle in cration most ordinary elment of water ,made fruitful in new way, to give birth to sons and daughters of God

Once again, combination of the extratorinary and the ordinary –

Water taken up by God's purpose

Ordinary and normal element of our lives, place we expect to meet God

-ordinary made extraordinary, don't flee from our lives t oreeting him

The artistic presentation of the baptism in the East can also help us to address the question with which I began. In Orthodox Icons and frescos, Christ is pictured standing in the Jordan. The waters which he blesses surround and cover him. In many of these icons, the water looks like a kind of dark cave or tomb in which Christ stands. This image pictures baptism as it is described by St Paul: ***Do you not know that all of us who***

*have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?* Rms

6:3

Christ who carries in Himself all of humanity descends first into the river Jordan as he will later descend into the overwhelming waters of death and hell.

To see Christ in his baptism already descending into death is a proclamation not that in Christ, death is swallow up in light: the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it. Christ does not only clothe human nature with light and life, he clothes death with light and life, death and suffering is shot through with life. The tomb of the water is a promise, and unless we can do away with all forms of death and loss in our lives it is a promise that we need.

‘Today the waters of the Jordan are transformed into healing by the coming of the Lord. Today, the whole creation is watered by mystical streams. Today the transgression of men are washed away by the waters of Jordan. Today Paradise has been open to men and the Sun of Righteousness shines down upon us.’

Let us pray that the promise of the baptism of Christ may be more real for us and more manifest in the world which he loves and came to heal.