

Trinity College Cambridge  
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## Scenes from the Life of Christ: Baptism

Isaiah 53 Mark 10: 35–45

The Baptism of Christ, El Greco

Colin Thompson

The Dean is a hard taskmaster. He has asked me to preach about a moment in the life of Christ which the Gospels themselves find problematic, though all four record it; for if Christ is sinless and John baptised for the remission of sins, why did he undergo the ritual? They all agree that John acknowledges the coming of one greater than he, whose baptism will be more powerful. Matthew, especially troubled, adds a private dialogue in which John tries to dissuade Jesus, but he is baptised nevertheless, ‘to fulfil all righteousness’, a phrase the meaning of which is not at all clear. They agree that as Jesus came out of the water the heavens opened and a voice was heard, but their accounts vary; in John, for example, the Baptist alone witnesses these things.

When faced with such difficulties, I seek help. The great seventeenth-century Anglican divine Lancelot Andrewes, preaching on the topic, concluded: ‘Christ received no cleanness, no virtue; but virtue he gave to the Jordan, to the waters, to the sacrament itself’. In other words, he was here, contrary to appearances, the agent of grace, not its recipient.

If the iconographical tradition seems unconcerned by the theological problems attaching to the baptism of Christ it certainly knows how to interpret the event. Take the words ‘The heavens opened’. El Greco’s opening is about as dramatic as it gets. Nearly two hundred years earlier, Piero della Francesca painted the dove descending beneath a tree – not without its own symbolism in Christian tradition - whereas El Greco divides his portrayal in two, the earthly event occupying the larger portion below and the celestial realm above it. The boundary between them is formed of diaphanous clouds, the conventional marker for separating the earthly from the heavenly plane, and reminds us that what we see in the upper part is not accessible to human vision and must be understood symbolically. But the vertical axis of the painting cuts right through these separated worlds, as the eye moves downwards in a direct line from God the Father in heaven through the shell and the water to the head of the one being baptised on earth. El Greco is telling us that the whole Trinity is involved in this moment: as his contemporary Andrewes put it: ‘Here is the whole Trinity in person: the Son in the water, the Holy Ghost in the dove, the Father in the voice’.

El Greco, like Piero, places three angels to the left of Christ, a traditional Old Testament prefiguration of the Trinity, but adds another between Christ and the Baptist, the last of the prophets. There is no biblical warrant for this intrusion. Or is there? If we read the episode as a discrete event we rather miss the point. Just as El Greco reveals that what is taking place is not simply a scene from the life of Jesus but the work of the Trinity for our salvation, so too he is pointing toward what will come next: Jesus being driven into the wilderness by the same Spirit to be tempted of Satan, and, in Matthew and Mark, being ministered to, as here, by angels.

For that reason, the ancient exegetical principle that all biblical texts interpret each other can be enlightening. As the Gospel proceeds, Jesus twice refers to his own baptism. In Luke 12.50, a passage with strong eschatological overtones, he says: 'I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened until it be accomplished'. And, as we have heard, in Mark 10 he asks his disciples if they can be baptized with his own baptism, in the context of a request from two of them for preferential treatment in the kingdom of heaven. Rather surprisingly, they claim they can and he agrees. Baptism has here become a metaphor both for Christ's coming suffering and death and for the martyrdom of some of the apostles.

Christ's baptism marks the beginning of his ministry; when the heavens open and the voice is heard, both his true nature and the redemptive purpose of God are set forth, and all that follows will flesh out the story. But it also defines its essential feature, that it is marked by service of others, not the exercise of power over them. As Jesus tells his pushy disciples in Mark 10, 'the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many'. Christians have always read the servant songs of Isaiah, from which our first lesson came, as pointing to this self-giving love. It is one which Paul captures exactly in Philippians 2, where the divine Son takes the form of a slave, humbles himself and is obedient even to death on a cross. It is graphically depicted by El Greco, in the submissive pose of Jesus. This is the Jesus who does what is not necessary in order to identify with John's call for national regeneration, and who embodies what Andrewes, linking it with the washing of the disciples' feet on Maundy Thursday, calls his 'good example of humility'. Andrewes goes further: he speaks of three other immersions in the life of Jesus: his agony in Gethsemane, his scourging, and the flow of blood and water at the Crucifixion, to conclude that it is this 'cross-baptism' which is the defining note of Christian living: not self-aggrandisement but letting go of self; not the proclamation of one's own righteousness, but the hidden righteousness of the suffering servant as the model for creative living.

The link between baptism and wilderness, which El Greco hints at, is intensified by the flow of the Gospel narrative. If baptism is a moment of revelation, the energies it brings do not send a confident Jesus straight into the public arena; they drive him into a place where he is alone and tested to the limit. If at his baptism the heavens open and a divine voice is heard, here, in the waterless wasteland the heavens are silent; that other voice, Satan's, comes to Jesus, and he must learn to recognise which is which. We should expect no less. We assume that a spiritual high followed by a time of doubt and aridity represents some kind of failure on our part; but here we discover that wilderness is a precondition for growth. In his post-baptismal ordeal Jesus battles with the voice which offers the attractions of a religion based on power or manipulation, including misuse of Scripture, and exposes them for what they are, the work of Satan, cheap tricks which cannot feed our deepest hunger. The Church has always struggled to be faithful to the Gospel when it is rich and powerful, or when it is so certain of God's will that it oppresses those who will not conform. But the way of cross-baptism, of immersing the self in the life and death of Christ, calls those who follow Christ to leave behind flawed blueprints for a better world, in order to build on a surer foundation.

This is what Paul means when he writes in 2 Corinthians 5 that 'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation'; not 'if Christ is in anyone', but 'if anyone is in Christ', for it is he, crucified, risen and ascended, who contains what by God's grace we are called to become. The Gospel writers have a more allusive way of making the same point, here by the Jordan as Jesus comes to John. They remember that in the second verse of Genesis 1 the Spirit of God hovers over the formless waters and God says 'Let there be light'. Now the Spirit appears again, over the river which marks the entrance to the Promised Land, the heavens open, and the voice speaks once more, to announce the coming of that light which no darkness can extinguish.

This layered nature of biblical narrative is a good corrective to literalist readings, Christian or atheist, and artists have always responded to it. Read in this way, the baptism of Christ ceases to be a theological problem and becomes the first scene of a drama which, as it unfolds, offers all who observe it the opportunity to move from being spectators to becoming participants. In El Greco's painting there is no obvious face looking out towards us, to draw us in. But at its very centre is the shell which holds the waters of baptism, Christ's first but also ours, and which, as every Spaniard of the age would have known, is the badge of the pilgrim. And who is the pilgrim but the one who catches a glimpse of the heavens opened or hears an echo of the voice, and who walks the way of the Cross, where all that is broken in ourselves, our society, our world may find wholeness through sacrificial love?