

The Baptism of the Lord: the now and the not yet

As the Christmas season draws to a close we find ourselves celebrating a series of epiphanies, a series of manifestations of God's presence: times out of time, times when chronos gives way to kairos, when we, who live in the *now* of the present moment, are granted a glimmer of the *not yet* of the Kingdom.

We have travelled with the Magi, who had seen his star in the East and had followed it to Jerusalem: a star, that for these wise men, fulfilled Zarathustra's prophecy of the Saviour's virgin birth, made 1,500 years earlier in Persia. We followed them to Bethlehem where they ¹*rejoiced exceedingly with great joy* and worshipped the little child and gave him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, symbols of kingship, priesthood and mortality. They had journeyed in hope, rejoiced in faith and worshipped in love, their actions mirroring our own call to follow, to journey, to love.

We were guests at the wedding at Cana, where Our Lady, echoing her own fiat, told the servants at the wedding feast: ²*Do whatever he tells you*, when the water of the Old Covenant became the wine of the New, when our humanity, in all its mortal frailty, was transfigured by the divine.

¹ Matthew 2.10

² John 2.5

And today we celebrate the Lord's baptism, when the sinless ³*Lamb of God* descends into the waters of the Jordan and, in so doing, in so ⁴*emptying himself*, pouring himself out in humble service to the Father's will, is highly exalted by the Father, who declares: ⁵ *Your are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.*

The letter to the Ephesians puts the question: ⁶ *in saying "He ascended" what does it mean, but that he also descended into the lower parts of the earth.* And there is no lower part of the earth than the River Jordan in the Judaeian wilderness surrounding the Dead Sea. It is the lowest place on earth. Gregory of Nazianzen takes this idea of descending and ascending still further. He writes: ⁷*Christ is illumined, let us shine forth with him. Christ is baptised, let us descend with him, that we may also ascend with him ... For with himself he carries up the world and sees heaven split open, which the earth creature had shut against himself and all his posterity, as the gates of Paradise by the flaming sword.* One simple act of immersion becomes the gateway to the Kingdom, for in Jesus' descent into the Jordan all the waters of the earth

³ John 1.29

⁴ cf Philipians 2.7-11

⁵ Mark 1.11

⁶ Ephesians 4.9

⁷ From the *Orations*: see Breviary II Nocturn reading for this feast

are consecrated, in the simplicity of this Jewish ritual bathing we are given the key of the door to the Father's house.

This ritual bathing had nothing to do with physical cleanliness, it was the place of transition, the doorway, between the everyday world and the sacred. We have a glimmer of this at the Last Supper with the Mandatum. Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet was a ritual bathing, a symbolic communion with himself, for he tells Peter: ⁸*if I do not wash you, you have no part in me.*

We are all being offered a part in Jesus through our baptism, which we remember and renew at the Asperges at Mass, for through it we became citizens of heaven; for ⁹*through Him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand and we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God.* And perhaps we touch base a little more frequently than we realise. Each time we enter Choir we take holy water from the stoup, sometimes we share it with the sister following us into Choir, we then sign ourselves with the Cross and step from chronos into kairos, from the everyday into the sacred. We enter the Holy of Holies, with its mercy seat and its cherubim.

⁸ John 13.8

⁹ Romans 5.2