

All four gospels see that you cannot ignore the canvas of Jesus' Baptism in the biblical art gallery. Something tremendous is happening here and we need to study this canvas a lot more closely.

Notice, for a start, just how crowded the canvas is. Look at different images of Jesus' Baptism, painted by artists and you will see that most concentrate on the main characters, Jesus and John the Baptist and the Baptism act. They give little indication as to who else is there. Yet every Tom, Dick and Harry should be painted in and this alone, will not suffice to indicate the conglomeration, for the small and the great are there, the servant and his master, the labourer and the landowner, the rogues and the religious, not to mention the prostitute and her pimp.

But why are they there? John the Baptist is the key, up to his waist in shallow waters of the River Jordan. Look at him in our canvas. A gaunt figure, preaching with his fiery eyes and accusing, pointing fingers with that rough exterior of a coat camel's hair, held together with a leather belt. In one of Canon Cleverley Ford's expositions of the scene he writes that: 'no Jew in that crowd could have failed to recognise his resemblance to Elijah, come to life again, ripping off the clothes of his hearers' outward religiosity to reveal the festering hypocrisy beneath.' The people didn't like it. They didn't like him either. But what he said got under their skin. God's day was coming when he would judge his people. The only way to escape impending judgement was by repentance, now, confessing sins and washing them away in the waters of baptism.

He was out to peel off all the camouflages by which people were hoping to hide their lives. Disconcertingly he kept on asking what sort of people they were underneath. No wonder they found him such a formidable figure. Through him they were being challenged to confront the bare truth about themselves and their real values. YET they were there in their droves, listening to his harsh message, coming to him to be baptised, queuing up to repent in the shallow waters of the Jordan. So why was Jesus in this queue? Why had Jesus walked from Nazareth where he had shut up his carpenter's shop door for the last time and said farewell to his family?

Did John know? Did he sense the implications of Jesus' crisis time? Or was he merely overcome by what seemed a surreal situation of Jesus trekking to the river for cleansing and repentance, amid the cosmopolitan, mixed bag of a crowd around him? It was probably a mixture of the two; that is why John held back at Jesus' approach. Yes, his baptism was a turning point for Jesus; exchanging his private life for a public stage, relentless in its pressure of constant ministry. But what is often forgotten is that it was also a turning point in John's life; from now on his influence would decrease as Jesus' increased. His work would be overshadowed by Jesus' developing ministry. John is horrified and protests: "I need to be baptised by you and you come to me?" He seems to know Jesus was the one he was waiting for; but why is he coming to me for baptism? What's happened to the agenda? What's happened to all the wind and fire, to the clearing and cleansing by God, to all about which he had preached for so long?

In the end he consented. John baptised Jesus. No thunderclap or earthquake followed to shake the earth. All there was a voice from God, so gentle, which said: 'this is my

beloved Son with whom I am well pleased'. The gospel writers describe the Spirit descending on Jesus like a dove. And so there we have it – our biblical canvas.

The problem with canvases, like photos, they often have frames and they always have edges - limits to what the canvas can portray. There is little of the massive crowds, the atmosphere, the noise, the busyness, the chaos of the queue and the heat, the smell, even the dirtiness of the river and dare I say it, of some of the people present. And, this atmosphere aside, there was, something tremendous going on here in this canvas and the edges make it difficult to identify what it is.

Last week, while browsing on a shopping trip, I picked up a DVD called the Crossing (the title or the film has no relevance), but below the title the film was described thus:

Challenge the past Accept the present Decide the future

And those three descriptions kept coming to me over and over again as I studied Jesus' baptism. I believe they can help us burst through the limits of the canvas and see what that tremendous something is which is going on.

Challenge the past. Jesus had seen the mixed multitude lining up for baptism. He had lined up with them in the queue. He heard their conversations, looked into their eyes – shifty eyes some of them, some full of pain or anger, some rebellious eyes, some full of compassion, some with sightless eyes. They were all there, old men and women, bent almost double intermingled with the pompous who were probably holding their noses because of the smell of dirty clothing and unwashed bodies. These people, Jesus knew, constituted the sphere of his ministry and he wanted to be identified with them and, as God's Son, in this situation, was an incredible challenge to anything that had gone before. The Holy Spirit had identified him with these people and we have God who is with us all, queuing up with us, in the midst of our broken, imperfect world. What an amazing challenge to the traditional beliefs, about God, held at the time.

Accept the present. History was being made in the shallows of the River Jordan that day. John knew this and he accepted it. He consented and baptised Jesus. That history was to have eternal consequences, which, maybe John didn't realise at the time. God's plan 'to fulfil all righteousness' was to be carried out. John accepted this. So too did Jesus. By the time he shut the door of his carpenter's shop for the last time he was thirty years old but he accepted that he had to move on to do his Father's work. He had to be baptised, not for repentance, but as a way of identifying himself with the very people he had queued up with. And everyone, including John, should have been aware, if only they could see it at the time, that Jesus was going to fulfil his Father's work, but in HIS way, humbly taking his place with God's people, and then, by taking their place, sharing their needs, their penitence, living their life and ultimately dying their death. The dove was the perfect symbol of all of this.

Decide the future. We must make no mistake, Jesus' baptism was a uniquely personal experience. Through it he revealed he knew he was the Messiah, and this didn't involve pursuit of glory and power but ultimately suffering and the cross. God, with his spirit descending gently like a dove and his hushed words, 'I am pleased with my Son', showed his approval and decided Jesus' future. Jesus was commissioned. God's words, taken from Psalm 2 (verse 7) and Isaiah Chapter 42 (verse 1) mark the accession of the anointed king to rule, yet put in the context of the suffering servant. The Holy Spirit took up permanent residence in Jesus and his future was decided.

When I last preached I spoke of an Advent Adventure and my bold intentions, last Advent, to listen to what the angels were telling me. In following my Advent Adventure I came across some interesting surprises, some strange encounters, fascinating insights into some of the characters in the Christmas story and eavesdropping onto some of the intriguing, feasible conversations at the time. I realised for example, very clearly, the real role of the visit of the shepherds and how dangerous the Advent Adventure is, exposing us to the risk of hearing the things we just don't want to hear, being led where we just don't want to go. As long as Jesus stays on the Christmas cards we have just recycled everything is safe. But part of the challenge of reading about Jesus' baptism is to learn to be surprised by Jesus. He comes to fulfil God's plans not ours and if we learn to listen carefully to what he says and watch carefully what he does we will find that our real desires, beneath our surface will be met and met in abundance. Jesus' baptism challenged past beliefs, it made known God's plan for Jesus and showed that by accepting them it decided his future. **Challenge the past, accept the present and decide the future.** Read again the story of Jesus' baptism in the gospels and see how it can really challenge what we have always done and through it how we can accept God's plans for us and equip us with his spirit so that our lives may be swept clean and made ready for future use, today, this coming week, through 2010 and beyond.