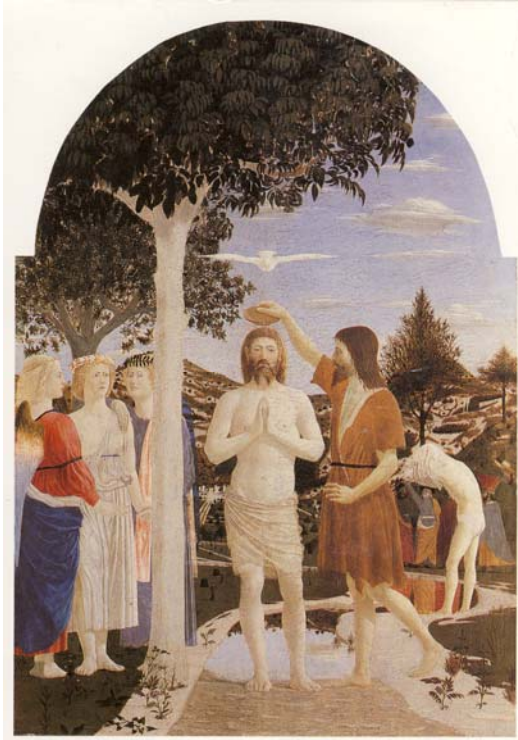


Sunday 22 February 2009: Sunday Next before Lent

Transfiguration

Readings: 2 Corinthians 4.3-6; Mark 9.2-9



The picture on the front of the baptism service sheet by Piero della Francesca of the Baptism of Christ many of you will recognise from the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery over the road. I think it is of the most special pictures in this amazing gallery and each time you see it, it is as though you are being asked to simply stop and gaze at it. If you haven't seen it already, or even if you have, go and gaze it after this service. You will not be disappointed. It is as though this whole picture is echoing the words of God: "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Everything in the picture seems to be leading our eyes to the face of Christ. I am always struck by the incredible stillness of this picture. It is as though this moment in time contains all eternity.

John Drury in his book *Painting the Word* describes this painting in these words: "The sacred body in which God dwells (central both to the sacrament of Baptism and Eucharist) is placed with exact centrality in broad daylight... So Christ stands there, defenceless and purely present. He is naked apart from his loincloth, as he will be when his sacrifice is consummated on the cross... This is a monumentally vertical picture. Everyone in it is standing and the axis of it all is Christ."

Christ stands in the perfect stillness of prayer and yet at the same time with the tilt of his legs advances towards us. He stands. He moves. Which? Both.

Are there not moments of stillness in all our lives when God moves towards us? Moments when we see... really see even for an instant into the heart of all things. Moments which can change us forever?

Philip Toynbee, as he struggled with depression, in his journal entitled *Part of a Journey* came to the following realisation:

The basic command of religion

Is not do this

Or do not do that

But simply look!

That would be an incredible discipline for us this coming Lent: to look; to really look.

Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Thomas Merton wrote:

“Being attentive... The whole thing boils down to giving ourselves in prayer a chance to realise we have what we seek. We don’t have to rush after it. It is there all the time, and if we give it time it will make itself known to us.”

Many of those who come into this Church look up at the new East window and their first question is ‘what does it mean?’ or ‘what is it of?’ and the answer to give is really the mission statement of this Church: “Look and see.”

Today’s Gospel is about what happened when those three disciples who were especially close to Jesus looked and saw. They saw the man that they had been with but whom they had not really seen. It’s often like that. We can be with people without really seeing them. The disciples had seen the stuff that Jesus had done but they had not yet really seen him. Mark’s Gospel in its opening chapters has pulled us into the action with those disciples in that initial burst of the Kingdom. Jesus has a power to draw people to him. He speaks with an authority they have never heard before. He can drive out the darkness and bring hope. He can, by his touch, bring healing; the saliva from his mouth, like the kiss of God, can open the eyes of the blind. He is like peace and stillness at the centre of the storm. Yet the disciples have seen these things and not understood. Who was this man that had become the centre of their lives... that even the wind and the waves obeyed?

And now in this Gospel three of them – Peter, James and John, and through them, us with them, are called into a moment of revelation: to leave the world behind for a moment and on a mountain to see for an instant into the heart of the truth. “He was transfigured before them and his clothes became dazzling white such as no-one on earth could bleach them.” I think that description is so insightful: witnessing this incredible divine revelation and describing it in such humanly visual and domestic terms of washing the laundry – their clothes white as no one could bleach them. We know now they have really seen. And suddenly the man they have been with is not only seen in relation to their lives and context but it’s like he has opened a window into our relationship with those who have gone before and somehow into our ultimate meaning. They see Jesus at the centre of all time and those great giants and founders of their history and faith, Moses and Elijah, on either side of him, as it were also pointing towards him, this carpenter’s son from Galilee. And now they are not only seeing they are hearing like the veil of the mystery of things being torn apart: “This is my Son. The Beloved. Listen to him.” For a moment they have seen into the centre of all things; the one loved by God the one who is the love of God.

And after this moment of vision they are going to have to return to the world of the blind. Of course they want to stay on the mountain but the thing about Jesus Christ is that this vision of God must be lived out in the flesh. They have seen the love which must be incarnated in their lives, they have seen the light which must be lit in the darkness, they have seen that God is

made flesh here and now and yet they have to return to a world that will want to put that God to death. Seeing changes things. Sometimes we may want to stay blind.

Today we are going to celebrate the baptism of a family and a reception into our church. It is a sacrament of those who somehow, through the events of their lives, have seen the beloved of God and long for the fullness of his presence.

About a year ago Helen Bamber, whose foundation works with asylum seekers and victims of torture, telephoned me to ask me to meet a man who had spent three and a half years as a political prisoner and had suffered greatly. "He needs spiritual help," she said. "He is someone special and I know that you will learn so much from him." Since then I have met him many times and he has shared with me his story. He told me about what it was like to be in prison, crowded in a cell, hundreds of them, standing most of the day, with no bed. He thought each day that he may be executed. These are his words to me which I wrote down and today he has given me permission to read to you.

"I always believed in God but whatever faith I could not find God in violence or revenge. This is not the God I believed in. I saw creation and creation proved it. I did not believe that creation came from cruelty. I did not believe you could find faith by force. In prison in my mind I kept thinking of a picture of Jesus. When I saw Jesus I saw one who was kind and giving... forgiving, not a ruler, he had no army, he never put anyone in prison. He never took anything for himself, he never wanted a palace or to profit materially. Jesus was also a prisoner like me, he too was alone, he was killed. Yet I found that thinking about Jesus gave me energy and strength, and I found myself asking him for help. When I thought of him I found peace in my heart. I do not come to Christ because of my hatred about what happened to me. I do not come because I want to rebel. I come because I saw that picture of Jesus. From someone awaiting execution I have been handed the chance of life."

The Transfiguration is a call to see; for all of us to see once again the true picture of Christ. Today you will witness these familiar signs: water splashed over heads, the sign of a cross in blessed oil, broken bread, and wine poured out. They are outward familiar signs, so familiar, so seemingly tokenistic that perhaps they no longer impact. But if we have eyes to see, it is so much more – together with those being baptised what we are being offered by God is the gift of life itself – to see that through Christ we too are the beloved of God. People often think that the basic command of religion is 'do this' and 'don't do that.' It isn't. It is 'look and see.' God is here all the time but perhaps we have not recognised our neighbour yet. Today you will see the outward signs of God's invisible gift of grace. As St Augustine said "Be what you see. And receive what you are." You are the body of Christ.