The Baptism of the Lord 2022

At Epiphany last Sunday at 11am we heard ‘Behold Three wonders mark this holy day:
This day’ – not that day, or one day, or a long time ago in a galaxy far far away, but ‘this day – a star leads wise men to the Christ-child, this day water is made wine at the wedding feast, this day Jesus is revealed as the Christ in the waters of baptism.

God, as we know, when we think about it, is outside of time and space. So when we draw near to God, we reach a place that no longer obeys the strictures of temporal or spatial order. Our prayers, love, to name just two obvious examples: they do not belong to time, they are at home in God’s timeless completeness. Our Liturgy, and the liturgical calendar, the events in which we participate in these Holy Mysteries – these things belong to time and yet are greater than time and space. They outclass such mundane conceptions and form a spacious forever into which we are invited.

The classic example of course is the Eucharist. Week by week through the Eucharist we are present to Christ’s death on calvary, and to the banquet of heaven, all at once and now.

So it isn’t silly for us to speak of Epiphany as ‘this day a star leads wise men to the Christ-child, this day water is made wine at the wedding feast, this day Jesus is revealed as the Christ in the waters of baptism’. It isn’t silly, it isn’t even poetic prettiness, or
whatever else people misconceive religion to be. What it is, is *true religion* – that is to say, human beings participating in the great truth-telling mysteries in which we live. Like a great river, in which we swim through life.

So, to the river. In a desert culture the river is life, healing, cleansing, crop irrigating, food cooking, fresh thirst-quenching life. It is very often the boundary between peoples, it preserves peace and order. Our own St Marylebone is St Mary’s Church on the Boundary river, the Ty (boundary) Bourne (river), St Mary-Le-Bourne.

And so Jordan’s water is the perfect symbol to carry all these meanings into the New Covenant God makes with creation through Jesus. John the Baptist (as hinge of Old and New Covenants) has been baptizing for repentance – forgiveness, a fresh start.

Any of us who make our confession regularly knows how wonderful and precious a gift *that* is, a fresh start. Confession is a thoroughly traditional Anglican practice too (not just Roman Catholics and Orthodox) and, as someone who makes his confession, I really can’t recommend it enough to you. I’m always happy to speak to anyone about it and help in any way. A few times a year taking time to think over life and dump the rubbish and make a fresh start is a simple and helpful gift. By it, we are returned to our Baptism, a truly fresh start.

But, to return to today’s feast, the baptism we return to isn’t John’s, it’s God’s. Christ does not need forgiveness. He is baptized in order to *institute* baptism. His baptism hallows all
water for the purpose of Baptism. A sacrament by which we inherit Jesus’ death and resurrection.

We’re back to religion and time and space again… in baptism we participate mysteriously in events that really happened 20 centuries and thousands of miles away. We become part of them, part of that great river of people and God. We call it the church, the Body of Christ, and this Body, our Body, is wounded and scarred, but has already met death and won, and is now destined for glory.

[0830: that’s why St Paul writes in today’s Epistle, words we will echo in the Post Communion Prayer, of our bodies as a living, holy and acceptable sacrifice. That’s why he says we aren’t conformed to this world anymore, that we are part of the one body in Christ.]

That is our true nature and destiny, thanks to Baptism, thanks to the Holy Spirit

[1100: awaited with rightful eagerness by the Apostles in today’s first reading. In Baptism, the Holy Spirit as promised (through a ritual action) effects an ontological reality: a real change of being. A Mystery seen in people and water and oil and that candle that ends up at the back of the kitchen dresser – is a life changing truth, written in the stars and carved in the fundament of the universe, or however else you want to put it.

[0830 In today’s Gospel, Mary and Joseph are slow to realise what God is doing in Christ. This little boy begins to confound
their expectations and, even as a child, break open the boxes, preconceptions and boxes that His ministry will smash, as He turns the world upside down for Love. Don’t let us miss the same trick.]

[1100: In today’s Gospel the people were filled with expectation at what John could do for them. But John, thanks be to God, saw what was really going on. From our little boxes of time and space, so must we.]

On this Feast of the Lord’s Baptism each year, we are given the liturgical equivalent of 10-foot-high neon flashing signs (because surely that’s what these revelations Epiphany are?). The Magi and the Baptism and the Wedding at Cana: 10-foot-high neon flashing signs that remind us who Jesus is at the start of the year, and who we are and can be as a result.

We’ll affirm again who He is in beautiful gift of the Creed in the moment. Who we will be as we live out our baptism (our true identity and belonging and destiny) who we will actually be, day to day and year by year? That is up to us and God’s good Spirit with us.

We’ll sing [say] the creed at ‘whatever past 11[8]’ each Sunday until we die, I hope, but what baptismal song of love’s triumph over sin and death, of hope of heaven, of faith and hope and love, what song our lives will sing in every other moment of the week in between? That, thanks be to God, lies in front of us.