

Seeing Beyond

Reflections on art and Christian faith

The Baptism of the Christ II
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Oil on canvas, 2005

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Jesus has just been baptised. Here he is, standing in the river, dripping wet, with the dove descending from above. But what is that brilliant white radiance around him? Is it the water splashing everywhere, as Jesus bursts out from underneath the water, full of strength? Or is it the power of the Holy Spirit raining down on him like a waterfall from the dove above? Or does it represent the presence of God, the Father? Giving us the full divine complement in one painting: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in whose names we are still baptised today; full of energy, light and life.

This is in stark contrast to the lower part of the painting. For through the water we can see Jesus' feet. Not standing shoulder width apart to keep him steady in the deep water, but nailed to the cross. Are those arms really raised in strength or held in place by nails? Is the bowed head receiving a blessing from above or hanging down lifeless? In the midst of the new life and energy of this painting, is a foreshadowing of the future awaiting Jesus if he sets out on his path of public ministry: death on the cross.

In the process of baptism we can see the submerging in water as symbolising death, followed by the re-emergence as resurrection and new life. Both are so vividly depicted here. And in this moment of baptism Jesus really does seem to die to self and rise to full life in the Spirit of God - enabling him to go out to set people free, even when it upsets those who like to imprison others; to speak the truth about God, even when it undermines those whose power depends on half-truths or lies; to offer love to all he meets, even when it makes him vulnerable to those who want no part with him. And when it leads him to death he enters his second baptism: truly dying and truly rising to new life in God.

What about us? According to Paul we are baptised into Jesus' death so that we, too, might rise to new life. But we only seem to manage a pale imitation of Jesus. The Spirit of God only partially taking root in us. How much more inside us still needs to die in order for the new life of God's Spirit to take hold of us fully? How many more times will we have to go through this cycle of death and rebirth? Until finally our unbelief is turned into faith, our fear and despair into hope and our selfishness into love. Until we, too, are fully infused with the divine Spirit and able to live as courageously as Jesus did.

Biblical References

Jesus' baptism ([Matthew 3:13-17](#), [Mark 1:9-11](#), [Luke 3:21-22](#))

John testifying to Jesus ([John 1:29-34](#))

Baptism in the threefold name ([Matthew 28:19](#))

Jesus' death on the cross ([Matthew 27:32-56](#), [Mark 15:21-41](#), [Luke 23:26-49](#), [John 19:16-30](#))

Jesus' second baptism ([Luke 12:50](#))

Baptism into Jesus' death ([Romans 6:3-4](#))