

Sermon for the Baptism of Christ, 11th Jan 2026

Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?' But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness.' Then he consented.

Quite rightly our saint objected, since, as the Gospel says, John had been "preaching a baptism for the forgiveness of sins". John recognized what Christian theology has insisted over the centuries – Jesus was sinless. He could have no need of baptism. But something else is going on here. Jesus is descending into the water, and water has an important symbolism in our faith and scriptures. We can go to the very first lines of the Bible:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

² And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

Then a few lines later:

⁶ And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

⁷ And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.

⁸ And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

⁹ And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so.

¹⁰ And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters called the Seas: and God saw that it was good

The act of Creation at the beginning of the Bible involves God bringing light into being, then separating the waters to create the world. The imagined universe of the ancient Hebrew texts is one in which the arch of the sky keeps the waters above from flooding in, and the roots of the earth keep the waters below from rising up to swamp everything. The Babylonian creation myths in the ancient text known as the Enuma Elish have similar worldview, but in even more drastic outlines. In the Enuma Elish the primordial chaos is a water-dragon goddess called Tiamat, who is killed and taken apart in order to create the world.

The creation in Genesis is more peaceful, but still has the sense that water is the chaos and uncreated state. The spirit of God broods upon the face of the deep, God divides the waters. We find this theme echoed in the Psalms, as well. The sixty-ninth psalm begins

Save me, O God; for the waters are come in unto my soul.

I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing: I am come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.

I am weary of my crying: my throat is dried: mine eyes fail while I wait for my God

The poet of the psalms cries out to God for “the waters are come into my soul” – as if God’s creation has been undone and chaos is returning. The psalm implies that salvation will symbolically involve separating the waters again, renewing the creation of everything. Psalm 74 has even more hints of the ancient mythology:

For God is my King of old,
working salvation in the midst of the earth.
Thou didst divide the sea by thy strength:
thou brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters.

Once again the act of sundering the waters is linked to God's power to save, and there is even a suggestion there of the stories of Tiamat, or at least of the ideas that water is where the realm of chaos beasts like Leviathan.

The same imagery of water recurs later in Genesis, in the story of Noah. I tend to remember the rain in that story as symbolic because it flooded the earth after forty days and forty nights, but actually the text is much more precise: *the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened.* ¹² *And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights.* The flood of Noah's time is described as the undoing of creation, of the waters coming down and coming up.

Then, once the flood has finished, we see Noah testing to see if the chaos has receded and creation has been renewed:

And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made: ⁷ and he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth. ⁸ Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground; ⁹ but the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark, for the waters *were* on the face of the whole earth: then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark. ¹⁰ And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark; ¹¹ and the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth *was* an olive leaf pluckt off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth. ¹² And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; which returned not again unto him any more.

First the dove returns, because the waters are still reigning over the earth. Then the dove returns with a leaf of an olive tree – the sign of peace. Then she does not return at all, because the earth has become habitable.

All of this leads us back to today's Gospel, and the second part of the reading:

And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

And we are able to see what is happening in clearer focus. Jesus has descended into the water, and re-emerged. As he does so, the heavens open, but not to drown the world. Instead the spirit descends in the form of a dove. As at creation, the spirit broods above the waters. As with Noah, a dove brings a sign of peace and renewal. God the Father acclaims him as the Son, and everything happening around him shows that he brings salvation. As Jesus rises from the water, the drama of creation is restaged. It proclaims that here is the one who will renew everything.

And in doing so, this drama of baptism seems to offer us a promise. Because, as we have said, Jesus is not plunged into the Jordan because he needs to wash his sins away. He is sinless. But he is in the water nonetheless, as a sign and a pledge. He is down in the chaos, in the rising waters which caused the Psalmist to cry out to God, and he is the answer to that cry. We might see the Baptism of Christ as the promise that there are no waters of chaos where he has not been. And he is the sovereign God, it is his realm, not that of the beasts. There is nothing we can find ourselves drowning in, no fear or suffering, where Jesus is not already waiting for us. Through his baptism, water becomes the means of our salvation.

Amen.