

Trinity College Cambridge
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FOLLOWING CHRIST FROM EPIPHANY TO LENT

Baptism

Eastern Orthodox icon of the Baptism of Jesus

Genesis 1: 1–5 Mark 1: 4–11

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In the rhythms of the natural world, the early weeks of a new year in January and February do not show much visible sign of change. Whatever may be going on under the surface of the soil, winter usually keeps a firm grip on what we see. But it is different in the rhythms of the Christian world. This time of year is much about change. Conversions happen. There is the conversion celebrated in Jesus' baptism. There is St Paul's conversion. And in the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, the conversion of a whole religion.

A conversion of Jesus himself might seem odd. Surely He did not need to change? In orthodox Christian belief Christ is the one person who did not need to change – for He was divine, perfect. Yet, as this evening's New Testament reading reminds us, Jesus chose to submit himself to baptism – and baptism was a symbolic act associated with change, repentance, turning round in a new direction. So what could this mean?

For an answer consider another story of Jesus in the gospels which, like his baptism, at first sight seems odd and embarrassing for one whom we claim to be divine and perfect: Jesus' encounter with a Gentile woman, a person of low social status in that culture.

In that story, recorded in Matthew's Gospel (15: 21–28), this woman asked Jesus to help her sick daughter, and initially Jesus refused, saying it is not fitting to give help intended for Jews to Gentiles – it's 'like throwing food for children to dogs'. The woman persists, however: she accepts she may be only like a dog and yet she still asks. And at that point Jesus seems to change his mind and heart. 'Woman', he says, 'great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish...'

So, what is going on there? Is it a change of mind? Biblical commentators from Calvin to the present have contorted themselves to interpret it in a way which does not require that obvious interpretation. Perhaps, they say, Jesus first refused her and emphasized her socially inferior status just to make it clear that when he did then accept her it could not be because of anything in her own status or merit. As Calvin said: 'the greatness of her faith appeared in that she [first] suffered herself to be annihilated in the making of the request' – making it clear that she was not relying on her own status, but only on the unconditional nature of Christ's love. In that way it shines a light on the sheer grace of God for her – and on the greatness of her humble faith which accepted her own lowly status.



And that is indeed a way of telling that story without implying Jesus changed his mind: that is, as a story that we do not stand before God on the basis of any social status or merit we think we have, but only on God's grace. And that is a very important truth in Christian teaching – but is it really the main truth of this story? Because by telling the story this way, as if it's primarily about us, it also has an effect on what it says about God. It comes perilously close to picturing a God who first rubs our faces in the dirt, to make us appreciate his kindness more when it finally comes. And is that really a true or worthy picture of the God of Jesus Christ?

I don't think that it is! If instead we focus, as we are this evening, on the baptism of Jesus – on the theophany of God as depicted in this evening's Orthodox icon, and hold on to what the Gospel story of Jesus' encounter with the Gentile woman is telling us about Him (rather than ourselves), we will surely see something else. It will seem to be a story of how Jesus himself changed in the encounter. It shows Jesus as a Jew of his time with inherited prejudices about this Gentile woman, and who then changes his view when he meets her: it shows a Jesus who, in that encounter, came to see and learn that she too had a deep, humble faith and love, equal to any man or Jew...

The baptism of Jesus is a sign of his unique capacity to help us. For how else can God in Christ bring us out of our inherited prejudices and our limited vision, except by the experience of doing so Himself as truly human?

This is the glorious and radical heart of the mystery of incarnation, rooted in scripture, summed up superbly by the celebrated maxim of the early Church Fathers: that ‘the un-assumed is the unhealed’. Only if Christ assumed real human experience, including our limitations, can He heal us from them. Only one born to suffer these same limitations, and who then transcended them, can help us do the same. As the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, ‘it was fitting that God, in bringing many children to glory, should make perfect the pioneer of their salvation through what he too suffered’.

Learning and turning through real engagement with our own humanity and the humanity of those around us is precisely the perfection which was ‘made’ (or baptized) in Christ, and with which He can help us in a way He could not have done as the cardboard cut-out ready-Orthodox-made perfection of a parachuted-in God who was never really human at all...

We can now see beneath the surface of this evening’s icon and probe more deeply into the significance of the figure of Jesus in the waters. It is a sign of change. A sign that revealed his nature as truly human, needing to grow and change. A sign that revealed his nature as truly divine, because uniquely he did do that – perfectly. And as such it is also a sign of His power to help us change – to see in a new way, seeing beneath the surface of things, seeing the ultimate truths and realities of people, life and death itself. And that may be just as well for as a former Dean of Chapel, Bishop John Robinson, reminded us in his last sermon in this place (quoting TS Eliot): ‘mankind cannot bear too much reality!’

We need help to see in this new way. If even the sinless one had to learn to see and act aright, and needed to encounter other people to do so, then how much more shall we need His grace to do that ourselves. Jesus’ willing plunge into the Jordan for baptism is the sign of that grace. In him change and conversion for us too is possible – and for our religion.

‘Thieves, fornicators, greedy and so on... this is what some of you used to be – but you were washed, sanctified, justified in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God’ (1 Corinthians 6: 10–11) – words of St Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians which give a traditional picture of religious conversion: in other words, an experience of moral change and a whole new orientation in life, all given in a personal relationship with Christ.

The appeal for conversion has been shamefully abused by the Church when it has used manipulation and psychological pressure to prey on vulnerable people and their fears. But it has been wonderfully used when offered with faith and love to transform lives, liberate them from despair and damaging self-centredness, transforming them to hope, generosity, and self-emptying love. It has transformed not only personal life but social life too as the 18th century slave trader John Newton testified – whose conversion to Christian faith eventually led him first to become a clergyman, then to join forces with Wilberforce in opposing the slave trade.

For this is the point: Christian baptism and conversion is indeed a whole new orientation of life, not just a new set of moral rules: it is an opening up to a bigger, more generous, Christ-like life – the very sort of change that Christ himself went through when his own boundaries were opened up to see the Gentile woman in a new more generous light.

And, finally, there is one more important ingredient to note. There also needs to be, as with Jesus himself, some willingness on our part to let this happen: a willingness to give up our tight control over the tent of our lives; to let the Spirit blow where the Spirit wills, not where we will. As a former Bishop of Winchester John Taylor wrote: ‘This Spirit blows most characteristically when, through despair or joy, we come to the end of ourselves...’ That is the point at which we are most likely to look up and out and see Christ, and see Christ in others.

So this is what we are invited to see in this evening’s icon of the baptism of Jesus: seeing more in One who is greater than us, and then being willing to follow Him. It is a change which requires us to relinquish our tight controls of self-preservation and self-justification, so neither the faint-hearted nor the self-satisfied are likely to welcome it. But it is the path of life.

It becomes the sort of new purpose in life which invigorated John Newton (who wrote ‘I once was blind, but now I see’), and which can quietly but effectively invigorate our own lives as well as the life of this College dedicated as it is to the name of the Holy and Undivided Trinity in whom all have been baptized.

It is a change offered to anyone, at any time – and available for us all, not just once, but for all time.