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22nd February: First Sunday in Lent

Genesis 9.8-17; Psalm 25.1-10; 1 Peter 3.18-22; Mark 1.9-15

In the Gospel we've just heard a striking account of the baptism of Jesus. Like our baptism it involved water, indeed lots of it! However, in other ways Jesus's baptism wasn't much like our own. Jesus was baptised in a river by a wild, hairy man with poor dress sense, rather than by a member of the clergy. The reasons Jesus was baptised were different from ours too. Unlike us Jesus wasn't baptised into membership of his Church, because it didn't yet exist, and also unlike us he wasn't baptised to be saved from sin, because he was himself salvation's source.

So why was Jesus baptised? As Mark presents it, Jesus's baptism shows he has the favour of God his Father, who sends down the Holy Spirit onto him. God addresses Jesus as his 'beloved son' and says he's pleased with him. In Mark's account we can only guess what exactly God might be pleased with, because this is Jesus's first appearance. But as Mark tells us nothing about his past, we can imagine Jesus having grown and worked faithfully and anonymously up until now.

But the Gospel isn't the only one of today's readings involving water: both the others, you probably noticed, prepared us for its watery theme. In Genesis we also hear about people emerging from water, this time on a boat. The floodwaters have dried up and Noah and his family have ventured out of the ark. Like when Jesus comes up out of the water and is blessed by his Father, Moses and his family after the flood are blessed by God. Also like Jesus, they raise their eyes heavenwards and see a sign of that blessing. The rainbow seals God's new covenant with Noah, his family and animals and all future generations.

I'm obviously not the first person to connect baptism with Noah. In Peter's first letter, which we also heard, God's saving of Noah and his family in the ark prefigures baptism. In the days of Noah, Peter says, God waited patiently for his people to obey him. He continued to wait even while the ark was being constructed. But the people remained stubborn and continued to follow their own way. As a result, God saved from the flood just one faithful family of eight people.

What did this salvation mean for that family? Noah and his wife, together with their sons and their own wives, were among the first of a growing group of faithful men and women in the Old Testament who waited for Jesus, who would complete the salvation that God had already begun. Mark describes how Jesus, after his baptism, is driven immediately into the wilderness, where he remains alone for forty days. To complete his work of salvation, however, it was necessary for Jesus to make another journey into an even further place in order to meet the people of faith who'd lived on earth before him. In verses that have prompted much reflection, Peter states that, in particular, Jesus went to make a 'proclamation to the spirits in prison' (1 Pet. 3.19). These spirits, Peter thinks, are the people who in Noah's time let their evil thoughts get the better of them and committed evil acts. In the Orthodox tradition, these verses have contributed to the belief that Jesus, after his death on the Cross, descended into hell in order to release the spirits who'd been waiting there for him from Old Testament times.

As many will know, Orthodox Christians portray parts of the biblical story in holy pictures called icons, and this descent is one of them.¹ In the image Jesus bestrides the shattered gates of hell, beneath which are strewn locks, keys, nails, bars and chains. Figures gather round him on both sides. Standing at Jesus's right hand is King David, the crowned and bearded figure who's looking straight towards Jesus and gesturing to him with both hands. Closer to Jesus and also wearing a crown is David's wise son King Solomon, who's pointing towards Jesus with his left hand and seems

¹ The version of the icon discussed here is based on the Descent into Hell from the Ferapontov Monastery, which is attributed to Dionisius (1440–1502) and his workshop, at [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Descent_into_Hell_by_Dionisius_and_workshop_\(Ferapontov_monastery\).jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Descent_into_Hell_by_Dionisius_and_workshop_(Ferapontov_monastery).jpg). This icon is now in the State Russian Museum, St Petersburg. A clearer modern rewriting may be accessed at <http://glory2godforallthings.com/wp-content/uploads/2008/04/descent-into-hades2.jpg> and http://paulhill.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/4487481139_a680cda0c9.jpg.

to be explaining to his father—who was sometimes distracted by earthly concerns—the significance of the event taking place. On the opposite side and also crowned, Moses stands in front of a company of faithful prophets, wearing distinctive hats, who followed the Law that God gave Moses, with ordinary people of faith standing behind. The prophets probably include Jonah and Daniel, whose stories of being swallowed by the whale and thrown into the lion's den prefigure Christ's own descent into the bowels of the earth (Jon. 1.17-2.10; Dan. 6.16-23). Also in the crowd are likely to be Isaiah, Jeremiah and Zechariah, who foretold Christ's breaking of hell's gates and bars and his release of prisoners (Is. 42.7, 45.2, 61.1; Jer. 51.30; Zech. 9.12).

We can imagine the 'spirits in prison' of whom Peter writes praying to God in the words of Psalm 25. Please be merciful and spare us from shame. Don't forget us in our loneliness and affliction. Let your love triumph over our faults. Forgive our sins, pardon our guilt and help us do better in future. In the icon, first among these spirits are Adam and Eve. Adam, now a man grown old with toil, and Eve, are lifted up by Jesus out of their tombs. We see they don't reach up to grip him through their own effort; rather, Jesus, as he descends with billowing robes, himself reaches down and takes a firm hold of them by their wrists. Adam and Eve, like all sinners, can't bring their own salvation but need to wait for the grace that comes from Jesus. Standing by Moses is probably Abel, the son of Adam and Eve, who was killed by his brother and so was the first person to die as a result of sin.

In icons, the blue rings surrounding Jesus, which are sometimes peppered with stars, symbolize the eternal light he brings. However, in this icon they also evoke his baptism. John the Baptist, with long messy hair and beard, stands closest to Jesus on his left side, as if on the edge of a deep baptismal pool. He looks at Jesus directly but reverently, pointing to him with his right hand while in his left hand clutching the scroll of Isaiah, from which he quotes at the start of his Gospel. At John's own left side stands Noah, cradling in his arms a miniature ark. Between them is Peter, who as we've heard narrates the scene, holding his first letter in his hand.

At the start of Lent it's good to remind ourselves of the historical panorama of our faith. Under the rainbow after the flood, God promises to Noah that he'll never again cut off his people and destroy the earth. We are part of this new covenant of God with humans, as affirmed in the waters of baptism. Let's rejoice anew today in God's promise of faithfulness, and not be disheartened by the tales of impending doom and disaster that we often hear. In baptism we're saved from fear and disaster by pledging our consciences to God and appealing to his resurrection power, through which he governs all things. This Lent let's retake our bearings, calling to mind God's pledge of faithfulness to the whole human race and repledging our own personal faithfulness to him.

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