

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Dove Descending

The scene of Jesus' Baptism at the Jordan is so scandalous, that we can be quite sure that it really happened. After all, if you wanted to depict your hero as the divine Son of God, the last thing you would *invent* would be his turning up to be baptized "for repentance". What had he to repent of?

Matthew's Story

Mark seems blithely unaware of this little theological problem. But Matthew spots it straight away; so to Mark's account he adds the story of John trying to dissuade Jesus, and saying: "It is I who need baptism from you." Then Jesus refuses to be denied, and so John baptizes him *as an act of obedience* rather than as a minister. He and Luke preserve Mark's story of the Spirit of God "descending like a dove" over Jesus as he emerges from the water. Mark described the "voice from heaven" saying (to Jesus, evidently) the line from the royal coronation in Psalm 2: *You are my Son*, and the line from Isaiah: *my Chosen One, on whom my favour rests*. Matthew took another swerve here: in case people reading the story don't know the Scriptural quotations, and draw the conclusion that Jesus is learning his identity *for the first time*, Matthew changes the words, and makes them an address from heaven to the bystanders (though clearly not to John the Baptist, who has already recognized Jesus' greatness). The voice says: *This is my Son, the Beloved: my favour rests on him*.

A Moment of Revelation

Jesus' coming to the Jordan is thus somewhat mysterious. He doesn't come out of repentance; *he comes to be with and among those who repent*. He is not there to say: *I, like you, am a sinner*; he comes so that they may receive the revelation that the Son of the Most High is among them, treading the same earth as these people searching for God. I don't know what the scene was really like. But I know that when Matthew and Luke read it, they were shocked by it: both changed it, to try to avoid the picture of a human being baptizing the Son of God. Reading Luke's version, you find that he never quite describes the Baptism itself, and that he has John the Baptist safely put in prison before it happens, so as to detach Jesus from John and his ministry. When we come to the Fourth Gospel, that Jesus was baptized is never even mentioned, though John does see the Spirit descending.

If it's embarrassing, it must be true

The simple conclusion to all this is, that if the evangelists worked so hard to modify the story, the one thing that must follow is that *they knew it was true*, and they couldn't leave it out even if they wanted to. So what was Jesus doing when he joined the people flocking to be baptized? I think, for one thing, he was identifying with the people who were responding to John. Prophets had been thin on the ground in Israel for three centuries before John. But Jesus knew that he himself felt, thought, and responded like a prophet; and when John took up the mantle of the ancient prophets, Jesus knew that he would have to join those who came out to him in the desert. I also think that Jesus may have thought of the Jordan as a good place to begin his own mission to Israel; when the forefathers came into the Promised Land from Egypt, the Crossing of the Jordan became a kind of re-enactment of the miracle at the Sea of Reeds, when God divided the waters for his people to cross dry-shod. One of the prophets depicts God saying: *I called my Son out of Egypt*, and Matthew had already remembered that when he told the story of Jesus' flight into Egypt as a baby. It is as if his Baptism is a solemn entry into the land God promised to Abraham, with the royal title *Son of God* ringing over him from on high.

A Man: Like Us In All Ways But Sin

Even if Jesus did not need repentance, he did need to grow, like every other human being, in knowledge and love of God. There's a great difference between God's eternal knowledge, and the learning a human being has to acquire in an earthly lifetime. I feel sure that this earthly need, the process of learning. Makes Jesus want to be with these brothers and sisters, as they seek to find entry into a new relationship with God. This bright image is our entry into the story of the Gospel, in this new year, with Matthew as our guide. Let us listen to him.

Fr Philip