

Dear Friends,

Welcome to 2021! We must hope and pray that this New Year will bring us and all humanity better things than 2020, an end to the pandemic and a return to normal life. Despite another lockdown we are at least able to gather in church and celebrate the Mass.

The Catholic Church has begun a Year of St. Joseph, a figure who perhaps does not receive much attention but who played a most important role in bringing up the boy Jesus and providing a model of fatherhood. We all learn what it is to be a father or mother from our own parents, so it must have been Joseph's fatherly care that showed Jesus what it means to call God our Father.

We heard of Joseph's role as husband of Mary in the stories of the Christmas season, which concludes on this coming Sunday with the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord. The visit of the Magi with their gifts at Epiphany, which we celebrated last Wednesday, is associated with two other mysteries – the first miracle of changing water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana and the baptism of Christ in the river Jordan by John. Together they make up the 'showing' (which is what epiphany means) to the world at large of who the new-born Jesus is, the one in whom heaven is wedded to earth, the human person who is God incarnate, filled with the Spirit and who enables our human condition to be raised up to God.

In the abbey church of Ealing, near where I live, there is a fine painting of the baptism of Christ made by a young man I used to know called Stephen. He had a workshop at the abbey and made several art works still on display there, paintings and wood carvings. Since I liked his work I asked him to do a painting for a prayer room that I was once setting up at Westminster Cathedral. By that time Stephen had moved away from London and gone to live in Walsingham, where I went to see him to talk about what he might do for us. He had chosen as a subject the two disciples on the road to Emmaus meeting the risen Christ on the evening of the first Easter Day. In fact he made three different versions of the scene, the last one which he wanted us to display showing the disciples crossing a bridge from the little village of Emmaus on the left to the hills of Jerusalem on the right, with Jesus going before them. The stones of which the bridge is composed look like broken pieces of the bread of the Eucharist, the body of Christ, one of the disciples is a self-portrait and the two are dragging after them a strange device resembling a large skull. In the top half of the picture Stephen painted small scenes of some of the great prophets – Isaiah, Jonah and his whale (he always liked watery subjects and sea creatures), John the Baptist.

I did not know much about Stephen and his life until that meeting at Walsingham, when he told me that in his earlier life he had been a bit of a tearaway type, but discovered his gift for art and his faith at the same time – the two very much went together. He had to struggle for most of his life with ill-health and sadly died at the early age of forty. I wondered if the skull-device in the painting was a symbol for the darker aspects of life, such as poor health, which we carry with us as we seek to follow the way of the risen Lord. Since his painting of the Baptism is near the font in Ealing abbey church, when conducting baptisms there I often drew people's attention to it and mentioned Stephen and his life. We do not know what a baby being baptised is going to grow into. We may have various dreams and hopes for him or her, which may or not be fulfilled. Any life, like Stephen's, may develop in various unexpected ways. What we can be sure of, however, is that the baptised have the gift of God's Spirit within them who will always be present whatever happens in their life. That may cause us to lose sight of God, but God never loses sight of us and is ever ready to share his love and life with us.

We may wonder why Jesus needed to be baptised when he is God already. The Sunday Mass readings at present are for the second of the three years, so we are following the Gospel of St. Mark, which has only a brief account of this episode. In Matthew's version we hear that John would have prevented Jesus coming to him to be baptised, saying 'I need to be baptised by you, and why do you come to me?' Jesus replies, 'Let it be so for now, for it is proper for us in this way to fulfil all righteousness.' It is not clear what this saying might mean, but some interpret Jesus' acceptance of baptism at the hands of John as an act of solidarity with mankind: he wishes to show that he is with us in all things, sharing our human life, our human condition in every way. This is indeed the point of the Incarnation, God becoming man. He enters into every aspect of our humanity, there is no part of it which he does not take on himself: for what is not assumed cannot be redeemed.

In the top corner of Stephen's picture he painted an axe against the background of the rocks. I asked him once why it was there, and he said it referred to an earlier verse in St. Matthew's Gospel about the ministry of John the Baptist, where he denounces those who put their faith in their ancestry, their descent from Abraham. 'Even now,' he says, 'the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.' The Christmas story can easily seem quaint and cosy, but it does of course have its violent side in the fear and hatred it causes in Herod, which leads him to eradicate threats to his own power by doing away with so many innocent children, and from which the Holy Family have to flee into exile. The coming of God into our world can bring judgment

as well as comfort. It presents us with the challenge of how we are going to live as the new humanity. Especially in this New Year, when we still face the huge problem of the pandemic though with signs of hope that it can be overcome, how we will continue to be God's people and place our trust in him is what we must address, for our own sake and for the sake of the world and people in general. But as we do so we can certainly take heart from our belief in Emmanuel, God-with-us.

There is an earlier well known painting of the baptism of Christ in the National Gallery by Piero della Francesca, dating from around 1450 (you can see it online). It shows Jesus standing by a rather narrow river, little more than a pond, against the background of a bright blue sky. John is pouring water over Jesus rather than immersing him in the river. There is a prominent walnut tree to one side with figures of three angels, while the surrounding landscape looks distinctly Italian rather than Palestinian! Artists of that period made no attempt to portray Biblical scenes as they might have been in ancient times, but used the features of people they knew and settings from their own time and place. They probably wanted to suggest that the event depicted did not just happen hundreds and hundreds of years ago, but is contemporary: it is happening now.

You might well have received Christmas cards with designs from Old Master paintings like this, Italian or Dutch artists of the 14th or 15th centuries, but I have noticed that very few of the cards produced today attempt to depict the story of Christmas in terms contemporary to us. I do recall one which showed a family on Christmas Day, flaked out after their heavy dinner, the children playing with their new toys and the dog chewing remains of the meal under the table. Through the windows of the house you could see a wintry scene with the three kings passing on their way. The caption was: Happy Christmas, don't miss it! We must not miss the truth of Christmas that Christ is born for us now, in our time and place, and in Christ God will be with us through this New Year and all our years to come. As one of my favourite sayings puts it, there would be little point in Christ being born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago unless he is born in us today.

Wishing you every blessing,

Fr. Robin

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