



Christian paintings which come from a time when many people could neither read or write function rather like stained glass windows and tell a whole story about the events of the life of Jesus and the saints in a way that can be easily understood by the unlettered. 'A picture is worth a thousand words', it is said, and paintings like the one we are looking at stood in prominent positions in a church to allow preachers to teach about the life of Jesus and the truths of the faith rather as I am about to do today.

This painting depicts the Baptism of Christ by Piero della Francesca who lived between 1415 and 1492. His style is very identifiable and very fine, but like many painters of his day, he worked locally, never moving far from his home. Piero lived and worked in a small area of Tuscany around the town of Sansepolcro all his life and many of his

paintings are still to be found thereabouts. This particular one, however, now hangs in the National Gallery in London. It is the central panel of a triptych and all that remains of the original work. It was commissioned by the monks of the Camaldolese monastery in Sansepolcro in 1440 as a tribute and memorial to their Prior General after his death. It was finished around 1450.

The Prior, Ambrose Traversari, later canonised a saint, had been an important figure in the Council of Florence which had been meeting at that time. The Council sought to heal the rift between the Eastern and Western branches of the Church and experts believe that various elements in the painting allude to this unifying work. For instance, in the background it is just possible to see men dressed in eastern robes suggesting that members of the Eastern rite churches shared equally in Christ through baptism as the Latin rite churches. As the author of the Letter to the Ephesians wrote, “there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism” and, in Christ, there is now more Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female - all are one in Christ - through baptism.

If you have ever been to Tuscany, you will notice that the trees, hills and scenery in the painting are all very reminiscent of typical Tuscan countryside. This is so that ordinary people could understand that the baptism of Jesus, and the whole of his life, is not history but is alive and present to them, relevant and important to them in their own lives here and now.

The painting describes the path of the believer who encounters Jesus in baptism and is led to the fullness of life in him through the Sacrament. Notice that the stream only begins at Christ’s feet. Until we encounter him our lives follow a dry, stony lifeless path, but passing through him in baptism life is like a fresh spring whose waters are full of life and colour and which reflect the heavens. The man in the background who has passed through baptism into Christ is putting on the white garment that shows he has put off the life of sin and is clothing himself in Christ through baptism.

The dry path may also be a reference to the land that was revealed when Moses parted the Red Sea so that God’s people could walk across to the Promised Land. The Red Sea is a common symbol of baptism which opens the way to the promised land of heaven for us.

The geometric design of the painting is interesting. The main focus right slap in the middle is obviously Jesus. He is the hinge around which the whole picture moves. But there is another: the very prominent tree in the foreground. This is placed at a third of the distance across the picture from the left. This is known to painters as ‘the golden ratio’. The tree has been identified as a walnut which, by an ancient tradition, was believed to be the tree the cross was made from, so that it brings to mind the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. It also stands for the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden the eating of whose fruit caused our first parents to be expelled from paradise. Taken together, these themes remind us of the Original Sin which infects the whole of human nature and which was cancelled out by Jesus’ death on the cross which restores us to the life

of Paradise through the waters of baptism. Just as, by a tree, Adam lost Paradise for us, so, by a tree, Jesus, the New Adam, regained Paradise for us.

The tree also has a third meaning when we take into account the three angels standing beside it. In the Book of Genesis three angels appear to Abraham and Sarah by the Oak of Mamre to tell them that, in spite of their great age, God will grant them a son, Isaac. It is clear from the text that these three angels represent God even though a concept of God as the Trinity was centuries away. The fact that the angels in the picture are the same height and have exactly the same face means that we are meant to understand that they are the persons of the Trinity. The fact that they are all holding hands serves to express their unity. Normally angels would be dressed the same in white or gold garments. These are all clothed differently. The nearest one wears both red and blue robes. Red clothing is universally used in paintings of the era to denote a heavenly figure while blue denotes an earthly one. The fact that the nearest angelic figure wears both identifies him as the second person of the Trinity, Jesus, who is both God and man.

The Trinity are here because the Christian is baptised in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and they are all represented here. But curiously, while the very centre of the paintings shows Jesus with the Holy Spirit directly above him as John pours the water of baptism, there is no Father. The joined hands of Jesus point our gaze upward and we would expect to see the Father in the clouds above the Holy Spirit, but He is not there. Experts tell us that this upward movement, also strengthened by the arch bringing the top of the painting to a climactic focus, once took the eye out of the frame to a roundel above the arch with a figure of God the Father beyond the confines of the painting in the infinity of heaven. This roundel has since, like the two side panels, been lost.

Baptism: brings us to new life in Christ, the life of heaven, free from sin, the reconciliation of the sin of Adam with the tree in Eden conquered by the tree of the cross. The life of the Trinity, the very life of God, is shared with us in our Baptism into Christ Jesus who points us to the fullness of life in heaven as he moves our eye up the painting to God who presides beyond.