



This painting of the Baptism of Christ is by Lorenzo Scott, and was created in 1987, (oil on canvas) and housed at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It illustrates a scene from the New Testament in which Jesus was baptized. The beam of light symbolizes the Holy Spirit, which descended “like a dove” upon Christ (Matthew 3:16). Lorenzo Scott painted Saint John and one of the angels as black people, linking the faith of his community to John’s mission to “prepare the way for the Lord” (Matthew 3:3).

Comment by Dawn H: Please bear with me; the juxtaposition of the arrival of the Magi last Sunday and now the Baptism of Jesus just one week later – yet 30+ years on in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ - has intrigued me, sparked by the reflection of our Team Rector on the Gospel Reading set for today from Mark 1: 4-11. I found this expounding by the **Rt Revd Christopher Herbert, Bishop of St Albans,** really fascinating and am sharing it with you.

The descent of the Spirit upon Jesus is not just about Jesus, just as our baptism is not just about our personal relationship with God. We are baptized into a community. We share together a creed, a history, and a struggle to make that faith real in the world. The Spirit calls us into community and is present in the community.

God does work in spectacular ways; but if we look for spectacle we most often will be frustrated. In this episode Jesus makes an anonymous entrance that the crowd missed, even though they had been “filled with expectation.” Even the voice from heaven is not a public broadcast, but a voice directed to Jesus. It will take the Spirit's gift of fire to burn away the veil over our eyes and our false expectations to purify us so that we notice Jesus' daily entrance - --there among the ordinary, especially the downcast, people.

Meditation: Some voices are unforgettable. If I mention the name ‘Edith Piaf’, a whole generation will straightaway recall the haunting, desolate beauty of her voice. In our own time the voices of Bryn Terfel and Katherine Jenkins have similar effects - that spine-tingling “something”, indefinable, never to be forgotten. Other voices, less famous, remind us of childhood, or adolescence, or times when we were either extremely happy or very sad.

Imagine now the voice of God. In the Bible there are times when the poets compare God’s voice with the sound of an earthquake (the ‘foundations shook’), or the sound of ‘many waters’. The effect is of awesome majesty and power.

At other times, however, the voice of God is described as quiet, intimate and very close.

This Christmas, as indeed every Christmas, God speaks to us through the stories of the birth of the Christ-child. The voice of God is tender, and very, very beautiful, calling to each one of us to enter the truth that the stories reveal.

Let me put it like this. When I hear a voice from my own place of birth - on the Welsh borders, I experience a pang of homesickness; a deep and sudden longing for the place where I was born and the people with whom I grew up. The sounds of that place, the sounds of those voices, continue to lie deep within my memory, and the yearning, the longing, are stirred. The Welsh refer to this longing in their word ‘Hiraeth’; a deep and poignant longing for a place and a people. And so it is with God. At Christmas, amongst all the noise and hullabaloo, if we listen deeply to the silence of our innermost souls, we shall be met by God. He calls us to simply be with him as he is with us in Christ Jesus. The voice of God is the voice of one who calls each of us to our eternal home.

He is the source and the destiny of the longing in our souls.

(Rt Revd Christopher Herbert, Bishop of St Albans)