

Many scholars for a long time have speculated about what the baptism of Jesus means; after all, Jesus didn't actually need to be baptized. Some say that by submitting to baptism himself, he instituted the sacrament of baptism for the Church; others reckon that the baptism of Jesus marks the moment when he became fully aware for the first time that he was the Son of God; others, that he allowed himself to be baptized so that the scriptures would be perfectly fulfilled; and there are others again who say that Jesus was confirming his Jewish rabbinic allegiance, because Jewish male converts were initiated through circumcision, a kind of ritual baptism and sacrifice. Perhaps these are all true, at least partially; perhaps it doesn't actually matter. The image of Jesus descending into the waters and rising out of them again, and the voice of God calling him 'Beloved', is of sufficient beauty in itself; the symbolism of the event is rich and deep enough to stand on its own. Verrochio, Leonardo da Vinci, Piero della Francesca, El Greco and dozens of more artists thought so, when they painted the image that they held in their hearts.

Some things can only be received by the heart – trying to understand them with the head destroys their meaning; imagine trying to analyse a piece of music that takes you to another world every time you listen to it. Or your love for another person. The mad Roman emperor Caligula once had his wife tortured to find out why she loved him. We can twist and torment the images in the gospel if we try to find out something that can't be known – only cherished. Last Wednesday we celebrated the Epiphany, when the three wise men came and laid their gifts before the infant Christ; the gospel tells us that “Mary pondered these things in her heart.” Some experiences in life are like that: they can only be carried in the heart, because that is where they release their fullest meaning. We don't really need a theological explanation of Jesus' baptism in our head, we just need to carry its image in our heart.

Jesus himself pointed this out when he said that the mysteries of the kingdom were hidden from the learned and the clever (*head*) and revealed instead to little children (*heart*); I don't think we have quite realised yet that he meant exactly what he said. He taught many times that the

kingdom belongs to those who are like little children – which is quite difficult to apply to ourselves; I'm *not* a child, I don't *feel* like a child, I am physically far beyond childhood; I wouldn't know how to go back and *be* like a child and I would almost certainly confuse childlikeness with childishness – because for most of us it isn't at all difficult to be childish. When Jesus said we must become like little children if we are to enter the kingdom of heaven, he was pointing out the difference between the head and the heart; he was telling us that the kingdom is to be recognised, received and lived through the faculties of the heart. It sounds a lot clearer when we imagine Jesus saying: "I thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the analysing mind and revealing them instead to the receiving heart." Or: "Unless you change and become heart-centred, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. It is to those who live from the heart that the kingdom of heaven belongs."

The head absolutely has its place – we would still be believing that the earth is flat without it, or that depression is caused by a fluid in the spleen; it is an unpleasantly false

humility to pretend to know nothing when we actually know quite a lot. The Pharisees and Sadducees did that... they affected ignorance in order to trap Jesus – and this never failed to grieve him. The human mind is from the same hand of the Creator as the human heart. An unfettered and unrestrained heart will always lapse into sentimentality, but there is nothing soft or sentimental in trying to live from the heart: day after day, to whatever degree we share our life with others, centring ourselves in the heart takes steely courage and authentic humility. The head will find a hundred-and-one reasons to justify our rudeness to another person; it will rationalise away our failures in love; the head will invent an endless list of excuses to avoid the company of those we find tedious or unlikeable; it will absolutely convince us that we live on a rather more elevated plane than those around us and so have a wiser, more refined view of things; in all this, it is the head that has the distorted vision, but the heart suffers the shame of it. Yet the two need each other. They should be partners, not opponents.

Despite the vast mountain of exegesis and theological commentary produced over the centuries, the gospels are aimed at the heart rather than the head. They do not have one single meaning but are multi-layered – saturated in meaning and truth like a sponge full of water – and can only be squeezed out by the heart. Today’s gospel is a case in point: no one can really explain why Jesus underwent baptism, but everyone can carry the image of it in within them. This is how it is meant to be. The gospels are written records of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ – the ‘good news’ of that life – and there is no reason to be uncertain about this. They are also extended meditations on the Person of Jesus and, in stories and parables, present us with a richness of visual images that can be encountered like music or poetry or art – meditatively, reflectively. If we ponder these images in our heart, as Mary did, they will take root and blossom there. The great prayer of the heart in the Orthodox tradition helps us to understand this: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner” is silently repeated again and again until it becomes a permanent part of the person who prays and forms a

backdrop to their daily life. Ultimately it is forgotten – because it is always there, spiritually nourishing us in the secret depths. In the same way, the images and words of the gospels that we receive and carry within us become forgotten by the head, because they are always there, in the heart. And being always there, they illuminate our daily lives with a light and a grace and a wisdom that reason and reasoning can't begin to explain. My favourite quote from the 17th century philosopher Blaise Pascal is:

“The heart has its reasons which Reason knows nothing of.”

That's a much better finish to a homily than I could ever think of.