

Sermon – Baptism of Lucas Ashworth
St Faith's Church, Havant - 7 July 2019



My favourite painting, painted by an Italian artist Piero della Francesca probably in the late 1430s, is called the Baptism of Christ. I'll never forget when I first saw it. I had been visiting the National Gallery and had wanted to see this painting before I left. It's not easy to find, especially if you're blessed with a sense of direction like mine. I got lost a couple of times and was just beginning to think that I wasn't going to get to see it this time, when I suddenly saw it, through an arch, right at the back of the Sainsbury Wing in room 66. I spent the next half-hour transfixed by it and then the gallery closed. I've returned to it many times since, to spend time with it, absorbing its detail, allowing the painting to do its work on me.

It's full of fascinating detail that helps us to reflect upon what baptism means, for Jesus and for us, and for Lucas. Look for instance at Jesus' feet and you see that the river in which he's standing seems to have oddly retreated and there's a dry patch of river bed in front of him. That detail reminds us that Jesus is a bit like Joshua in the Old Testament who parted the river Jordan and led the people of Israel into the promised land. In baptism we're reminded of the story of God saving us as it resounds throughout history. Baptism is a journey from slavery to freedom, and to the forgiveness, healing, life and joy that God has promised to us.

But the story of God's saving love is not only a story for the Israelites, it is for us too. Piero has set the Baptism of Jesus, not in Palestine but in his native Tuscany. In the painting, beside the river you can see seven different varieties of plant all native to Tuscany. A reminder that God's love is not confined to first century Palestine but reaches to where we are. That love reaches to Havant where it has been received and celebrated in baptism in this church for the past nine centuries. Today as we come to baptise Lucas we join him to this story, Lucas enters today into a tradition of Christian love, worship and service that existed for centuries before him and will continue for centuries after him too.

The thing I probably love most of all about the painting is the incredible stillness of it. Part of this is Piero's use of strong vertical lines, a restricted colour palette, and a certain clarity of light that are characteristic of his painting. But behind this there lies some meticulous

planning. Piero was a very talented mathematician who wrote several books on the subject and who had a particular interest in geometry. For the first three centuries after his death he was remembered more as a mathematician than an artist. You'll see here that the tree in the painting divides it in a particularly satisfying way, according to something called the golden ratio. You can draw an equilateral triangle running across the bottom of the circular arch which finishes at the point of Christ's foot and reminds us of the trinity. The centre point of the triangle is the very tip of Christ's fingers held together in prayer. And that's only the beginning of some other extremely complex geometrical patterns hidden in the painting.

That same kind of meticulous attention to measuring we find applied to babies. Those measurements begin with scans before they're born, and they continue with Apgar scores for tests which are done 1 min and 5 minutes after they are born. They are also weighed of course - information that is often shared when their birth is announced – Lucas was . We count the hours, days, weeks, and months of their life. There's a red book (the Personal Child Health Record) given to parents when babies are about 10 days old where their measurements and development are carefully plotted on graphs and regularly reviewed. Yet important as all this measuring is, it doesn't begin to describe adequately the wonderful reality of a new human life. Just as the mathematical description of the painting, on its own tells us little about the painting itself.

Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, records a beautiful prayer for them which we heard read earlier. In that prayer for them he invites them to a different kind of measuring and a different kind of knowledge. Paul prays that they may know the height and depth, and length and breadth of God's love for them. It's a hugely evocative image, an invitation to experience what they couldn't begin to measure in order to glimpse a love that they could scarcely imagine.

And so for Lucas this morning, we're reminded that beyond all the attempts to measure his progress and chart his development, is a reality that is far more important. Beyond all the details in a neatly completed little red book is the reality of a child of God, made in God's image. And the most important thing for Lucas as he grows up is knowing that he is utterly, utterly loved by God and by us. Our prayer for him today is that he would know the height and depth and length and breadth of God's love for him, that he would hear, as Jesus heard at his baptism, God's voice saying 'You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased.' It's the task of parents, godparents, family and all of us to give to him the love and security that enables him to hear, receive and understand God's delight in him.

And may all of us this day know afresh that unmeasurable, immeasurable love of God.
Amen.