

# Icons of belovedness

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 12 January 2025

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Epiphany 1C The Baptism Of Jesus

**Contemporary Reading: 'You Are Accepted' by Paul Tillich; Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22**

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

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When I hear today's story of the baptism of Jesus, what often comes to my mind is a stained-glass window in the Anglican church of St Luke Toowoomba. It was certainly a handy teaching aid over the years I presided at baptisms there. After all, there is much truth in the well-known saying that a picture can paint a thousand words. That is certainly a strength of churches like St Luke Toowoomba, which also has a number of other even more significant stained-glass windows, accompanying its Gothic Revival architectural features.

Not all those windows are also reflections of other ages on another continent. The great western window above the baptistery is a particularly beautiful contemporary stained-glass window. This, with its mandala-resonant patterns, highlights a wide range of Australian animal, cosmic, and other natural features, and resembles a kind of dot-painting as a whole. The church is thus in some ways a veritable picture book, as well as a key city centre space for worship, music and other artistic and festival events.

In a similar manner, our current liturgical season of Epiphany is also like a picture book. It too contains various images to encourage and challenge us: significant stories which are icons of God's love. Let us therefore reflect today on the baptism of Jesus, which is a particularly powerful icon of God's love, and of our beloved place within it. Indeed, in some Orthodox traditions, it is much more important than the birth narratives of Jesus. After all, they are an amalgam of different stories in only two Gospels, whereas the baptism of Jesus appears as a vital narrative in all four Gospels. Crucially, for example, in the Synoptic Gospels it is found immediately before the stories of Jesus' temptations.

Its central declaration of the beloved-ness of Christ, and our associated beloved-ness, is therefore the vital antidote to the threats and traumas of our world. Let us then look at three particular features of today's iconic story, with the aid of three significant contemporary painters of the scene, and, thereby, encourage us too to share and become icons of divine beloved-ness ourselves...

Before reflecting on the Gospel story and three associated contemporary icons, it is however salutary to recall their nature and how we can best be illuminated by them. For we modern people are inclined to look at such pictures in an overly flat manner. We are typically accustomed to representational art, conveying information and/or pointing us to some other aspects of life on a common level of existence, often prompting us to action. Icons and Gospel stories like today's are different. They need to be approached contemplatively.

For as windows to heaven or doorways to the sacred, they exist to remind us of the presence of holy, and help open us more fully to life's deepest mystery, in the love of God. Their purpose is not so much about functionality, or instrumentality, with which our contemporary world is so obsessed. Rather, like so much of the heart of religion properly understood, they are symbolic, much more like art than law or even morality, and they invite us into deeper reflection, awareness, re-imagination, and transformation.

Recalling St Luke Toowoomba, I remember well a young organiser of the former Easterfest, or Australian Gospel Music Festival, once taking to task some Pentecostal visitors for dismissive comments about mainstream churches as they arrived for an event. *'Look more closely'*, he said, kindly, but firmly, *'and you will see that every main feature in this building has a symbolic purpose. Each points to a key element of Christian Faith, and, as a whole, it is itself an icon of God's love, containing so many other icons of God's love.'*

In a similar manner, it is sometimes tempting for some Christians, as well as others, to despise other features of our ecumenical Traditions, including the common lectionary we use, not seeing how they offer us key elements of Christian Faith as pointers, or icons, of God's love. Perhaps this is a continuing effect of the Reformations. For the more Protestant the Reformations were, the more they tended to sweep away all kinds of artistic and sensate expressions of Christian Faith, except those related to the ears and to reading of texts. Hearing and reading, together with music and singing, came powerfully to dominate in sharing the Faith. Seeing and the visual arts were strongly discouraged.

In recent times, many Protestants have however come to appreciate the value of all the arts and their hugely significant contributions to spiritual life. This has become especially vital recently. For, like pre-Reformation times, our age has again become centred on images rather than words. Indeed, if anything, our age is over-saturated with images, shared in astonishing and unprecedented forms and speeds. Words like icons and iconic are thus frequently bandied about, often without much sense of precision or illuminating meaning.

In contrast, icons in Christian, not least Orthodox, traditions have specific connotations and deliberately seek to enlarge our lives. We can see this, I hope, in the three images I have chosen. Each are drawn from a post by Victoria Emily Jones, entitled *'Contemporary icons of the Baptism of Christ'*,<sup>i</sup> from a website, entitled *artandtheology.com*, into which I warmly encourage further exploration. Do so however with the eyes of your heart, contemplatively. For as C.S. Lewis rightly observed: *'The first demand any work of art makes on us is surrender... Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way.'*<sup>ii</sup>

The first icon<sup>iii</sup> of three I invite us to open ourselves to is the *Baptism of Christ* by Lyuba Yatskiv. This is the most traditional in form, with a number of canonical iconographic features, together with others that emerge from the deep intuitive reflection of the artist and further illustrate the dynamic movement which is core to the divine life of Jesus and any of us who are baptised in Christ's Name. For, as the Revd. Dr. Ann Laird Jones, a Presbyterian Minister from the USA, has rightly observed, the baptism of Jesus is a symbol of the divine 'choreography' in which we are invited to live and move.<sup>iv</sup> Yatskiv's icon is thus an invitation into the dance of love within and between the persons of the Holy Trinity, with grace continually pouring out like the waters of the river Jordan, filling up and flowing through the humanity of Jesus. Note the semicircle at the top, which signifies the *'opening of the heavens'* in the story and the voice of God reaching down; with a dove descending, reflecting the Gospel writers' simile.

On the shores of the Jordan stand John the Baptist and angels in divine service, with the angels' hands covered by their own cloaks as a sign of reverence. Note also the allegorical figure in the icon in the river by Christ's feet, pouring out water from a jug. This is a personification of the Jordan River, which miraculously dried up, temporarily, to allow the ancient Israelites to cross over into the Promised Land, and which signifies a new creation. Yatskiv also includes an axe lying next to a tree, alluding to John the Baptist's words about cutting down trees that do not bear good fruit.

Such an image is intended to draw us beyond our immediate concerns into the eternal mystery of God, yet very much in awareness of human realities. For Lyuba Yatskiv is a leading member of the Lviv school of contemporary iconography in war-torn Ukraine – see further via the online Iconart Gallery.<sup>v</sup> In addition to her empathic innovative style, she has therefore helped strengthen her people through her work, including through projects such as the 'Icon saves lives – Ukraine' fund-raising initiative in February 2023.<sup>vi</sup> This presented contemporary icons created by 20 artists on boards that were removed from ammunition crates from the continuing war in Ukraine. These icons not only reflected on the emotions of witnesses bound up in war but also represented the faith, hope and strength to overcome such calamity, by offering reminders of the mysteries of divine love which can transform all suffering into the ultimate realities of new life. Thus the meaning of the baptism of Jesus is revealed: the divine presence made real among us and human realities lifted into the transcendent, through the dynamic movement of divine love.

If the first icon encourages us to share in divine choreography, the second icon<sup>vii</sup> I offer today manifest this in the powerful spiritual theme of water. This icon is also from another female member of the Lviv school, Ivanka Demchuk, a younger Ukrainian artist born in 1990. In this work entitled *Baptism of Christ* the water bubbles, falls, splashes, and practically jumps out at us. Through her use of both ancient and modern technologies, including chalk gesso, the water thus almost leaps out of the painting, even as Jesus, John the Baptist, and the three angels/bystanders assume very traditional postures. We may almost feel the spray of the water on our skin as the water races around. These huge waves could be the waters of creation, or the Red Sea crashing down on Pharaoh and his armies: in either case, the water pulls us into something huge taking place. Demchuk's work is such a powerful reminder of the power of baptism, truly understood and entered into.

Out of the waters of death we find new life: this is the meaning of baptism to which Ivanka Demchuk's own experience, personally and as a Ukrainian, bears witness. '*My parents are doctors*', she has said, '*so they did not plan for me to become an artist.*' However, from a very early age, she had serious issues with her eyesight and her ophthalmologist prescribed an intriguing treatment. '*To increase the visual load in one eye*', Ivanka has related, '*I had to obscure the other eye and then do a lot of painting, sculpting, and colouring.*' In this she found both her purpose and flourishing.

Long before Putin's invasion, she also believed in the timeless relevance of stories such as the Good Samaritan and St. George the Dragon Slayer battling evil. In the context of the current war, some of her images take on even deeper significance. '*The evolution of human consciousness has not gone far enough*', she has observed, '*to render us qualitatively different from people who lived two millennia ago. We are facing the same problems and issues; we may become traitors just as those who crucified Christ.*' However, as revealed through the icons of the baptism of Jesus, in participating in the dynamic flow of divine love, we may also assist in God's transformation.

Rowan Williams has put it this way:

*Baptism does not confer on us a status that marks us off from everybody else. To be able to say, 'I'm baptised' is not to claim an extra dignity, let alone a sort of privilege that keeps you separate from and superior to the rest of the human race, but to claim a new level of solidarity with other people. It is to accept that to be a Christian is to be affected – you might even say contaminated – by the mess of humanity. This is very paradoxical. Baptism is a ceremony in which we are washed, cleansed and re-created. It is also a ceremony in which we are pushed into the middle of a human situation that may hurt us, and that will not leave us untouched or unsullied. And the gathering of baptised people is therefore not a convocation of those who are privileged, elite and separate, but of those who have accepted what it means to be in the heart of a needy, contaminated, messy world. To put it another way, you don't go down into the waters of the Jordan without stirring up a great deal of mud!<sup>viii</sup>*

These great themes of the dynamic movement of divine love and its expression in images of water are then intimately linked to that of the ineffable light of God to which icons of the baptism of Jesus point. This is powerfully expressed in the third icon I offer<sup>ix</sup>, that of *The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan* by Jerzy Nowosielski, who, among other things was a graphic artist, Eastern Orthodox theologian, and, arguably, the greatest of modern Polish icon painters. For Nowosielski's work combines both the sacred and the profane, fusing the profundity of Orthodox mystical theology with secular reality, literally drawing together canonical tradition and abstract modern art. <sup>x</sup>

Like the Lviv school, the context of Nowosielski's work involved his journeying through personal and national suffering, and finding transcendent light amid the darkness. He indeed echoed Dostoyevsky's dictum that *'beauty will save the world.'* 'Art', he wrote, like deep spirituality, *'will help us carry our reality onto that other side. Grace does not cross nature out and we will still bear the marks of our sufferings, but they will be transfigured.'* This is part of what his icon seeks to reveal, with the powerful colours, like a Kandinsky or Mondrian work of art, pointing us to transcendent light.

Do such icons touch your soul? Do they draw you into the ineffable light of divine love? Their point, like the Gospel text, is to encourage us all to recognise that dynamic movement of love in our own hearts and lives, to go deeply into the waters of life with renewed focus, and thus to become living icons of love ourselves. For, whoever we are, wherever we come from, we are all not only accepted by God but fully beloved and, in God's grace, sources of light. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://artandtheology.org/2018/01/06/contemporary-icons-of-the-baptism-of-christ/>

<sup>ii</sup> In: *An experiment in Criticism*

<sup>iii</sup> [baptism of christ by lyuba yatskiv - Search Images](#)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://calltoworshipjournal.org/art-and-baptism-the-choreography-of-visible-and-invisible-grace/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://iconart-gallery.com/en/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://artfiragallery.com/exhibitions/icon-saves-lives-ukraine/>

<sup>vii</sup> [ivanka demchuk ukrainian, 1990– , baptism of christ, 2015 - Search Images](#)

<sup>viii</sup> Rowan Williams, in *Being Christian*, 2014

<sup>ix</sup> [Jordan The Baptism of Jesus by Jerzy Nowosielski on artnet](#)

<sup>x</sup> <https://imagejournal.org/article/acquainted-with-the-night/>