

A governor of an open prison once remarked how he could tell the old lags from those new to the system because when they first arrived he would see them standing at the far end of the football field gazing at the sunset and staying there until it was done. And an old lag confirmed this – with tears in his eyes- saying that it was for many of them the first time in years that they had been able to see such a sight and to stand before an open horizon. And it was enough, because of course being in an open prison was a sign that they were already near release, a message of hope then that freedom was on the way. I wonder if we can see Christ's baptism in a similar way – a signal of impending release, a scene we can stand before knowing that something is happening here which, just like that sunset for the old lags will take us out of ourselves, even momentarily, and at the same time restore us to our true selves, even momentarily. A moment of awe. All of a sudden John and those around him see something in Jesus which transcends his earthly appearance and not only transforms him but transforms them also – an entirely physical phenomenon – a human being like us in all things but sin (as we say) but willing to be baptized by John for the forgiveness of sins, a man then with total humility descending into the waters of chaos which seem ready to overwhelm us every day. And the heavens open and a voice is heard – a commentary on the scene below, for in the terror of the waters which creation throws at us every day is the hope also of renewal and re-creation, of a new sun which will rise on us again and again ,a sign then of humanity transcended, of our imprisonment here below not having the last word after all, telling us that change is possible. It's a vista of new horizons opened up for us in the history of Jesus and Israel. God has not abandoned us after all but within that history of physical limitation and failure comes to us as a servant figure, totally immersed in our nature to the point of sin and transcends it, redeems it, rescues it from oblivion. Israel indeed will be great again but not in the way that has led it astray, it will be great in holiness, a light to the nations, recovering it's purpose as not here for itself only but for others also. If there's anything those old lags see which will transform them more it will be their following of this new expansive horizon – taken out of themselves to be of service to others.

Br John Mayhead

Monastery of Christ Our Saviour