

# Risen Christ



The Baptism of the Lord

10 & 11 January 2026 - Year A

## The Catholic Communities of Our Lady Help of Christians, Eltham & St Francis Xavier, Montmorency



We acknowledge the Wurrundjeri people of the Kulin Nation who are the traditional custodians of this land and pay our respect to the elders past, present and emerging.

### Gospel: Matthew 3:13-17

Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptised by John. John tried to dissuade him. 'It is I who need baptism from you,' he said 'and yet you come to me!' But Jesus replied, 'Leave it like this for the time being; it is fitting that we should, in this way, do all that righteousness demands'. At this, John gave in to him.

As soon as Jesus was baptised he came up from the water, and suddenly the heavens opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming down on him. A voice spoke from heaven, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on him'.

### Reflection - Break Open the Word 2026:

The two sentences that describe Jesus coming up out of the water of the Jordan and the manifestation coming down from heaven bristle with significance. We will see similar language at the Transfiguration which gives us a glimpse of the resurrection. It reminds us of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It establishes right at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry that his mission of proclaiming and establishing God's kingdom in word and in action is the work of God, the Son with the Father and the Spirit.

But first, Matthew wants to clarify a couple of hesitations. John's baptism is a baptism of repentance from sin... but Jesus is sinless. John points to Jesus as the greater... yet Jesus submits to his baptism. So, there is a preparatory conversation in which Matthew is basically sidelining these embarrassing elements. Let's not worry about them for the moment, he seems to say. In his ministry, Jesus would often associate himself with sinners.

### An exhausted mother and her newborn child

#### The universality of the Christmas couple

**The mother** is exhausted: eyes closed, on the verge of sleep. Her fingers are positioned around her left nipple, and she is proffering it in the direction of a baby whose arm reaches up to her face, caressing it gently, hoping that his mum will wake up and play with him. His face is a study in concentration: the love and trust it contains is exquisite.

This is a Madonna and Child painting from the Baroque era: because what better sums up the season than a visual depiction of Mary and her baby son? It's the heart of what Christmas is all about, a universally relatable image. Wherever in the world or in history we are or were, newborn babies and their mothers look the same, behave the same and have the same instincts.

The mother and child at the heart of Christmas is so simple, and yet so powerful. Artists through history have interpreted this central theme of the story to make points about politics and war, inequality and greed. A few years ago a church in California depicted the newborn Christ, with Mary and Joseph, in cages, to make a point about migrants trying to enter the US. Other artists have depicted the Holy Family as modern-day refugees; and a graffitied icon on the Separation Wall in Bethlehem depicted a dragon racing towards Mary and her baby - a reminder that for many real-life mothers and babies, in the world and even in the very town where Christ was born, the festive season is as dangerous, violent and fearful as every other week.

The artists of yesteryear - of the Renaissance, in particular - idealised the events of the first Christmas. There are many great and wonderful works: Caravaggio's Mary gazes at her boy, their faces inevitably bathed in light, while an angel swoops down with a banner declaring "*Gloria in Excelsis Deo*". Piero della Francesca's blue-hued *Nativity* in the National Gallery has lute players serenading the child who lies naked on the ground while his mother, miraculously recovered and slim-bellied, kneels in prayer alongside.

But my favourite painting of the mother and child at the heart of Christmas is the Baroque painting I described. It hangs in the Galleria Spada in Rome: I'll be there again in January to admire it in the flesh, and I have a print of it in my bedroom. It differs from the vast majority of historic Nativity paintings because it was by a woman: Artemisia Gentileschi. When she created this work, she was aged around 20, and not yet a mother herself; but she had clearly been around plenty of women and newborns, and she conveys the scene with a sense of reality that is often missing in many of the angel-heavy, romanticised versions of the scene by male artists.

This Christmas I'll be with my daughter and her baby; on Christmas Day, as every day, she'll be feeding him, probably feeling a bit exhausted (there are eight of us going to hers for lunch!). The reality and hope and promise of one child's arrival into the world will be there in her kitchen, as it was there in the stable at Bethlehem; the photographs we will take of the two of them are as valid a depiction of the first Nativity as anything painted by Caravaggio or Piero or even Artemisia. And therein lies the miracle. A baby was born, and everything changed for the better, for all of us. **J.M.**



*This parish has a commitment to ensuring the safety of children and vulnerable people in our community.*

*We support the recommendations of the Royal Commission into institutional abuse and pray for all the survivors.*



## Gratitude, Grace, and Relationship

***Theologian Christine D. Pohl describes how gratitude impacts our relationships with others:***

When our lives are shaped by gratitude, we're more likely to notice the goodness and beauty in everyday things. We are content; we feel blessed and are eager to confer blessing. We are able to delight in the very existence of another human being. In a grateful community, individuals and their contributions are acknowledged and honored, and there is regular testimony to God's faithfulness, through which the community experiences the joys of its members. Expressions of gratitude help make the community alive to the Word, the Spirit, and God's work.

Such a community is "a beautiful land" whose culture is grace and whose inhabitants see life as a gift. In this land, we often find abundant forgiveness and frequent celebrations. While we might assume that individuals and communities grow toward holiness and goodness primarily through the hard work of discipline, correction, and challenge, we tend to underestimate the importance of grace. The emphasis on loving God and loving neighbour ... is most fruitful as it is rooted in a deep understanding of God's prior love for us.

Pohl shares how a small Christian inter-racial community in Mississippi was able to find grace and gratitude for one another in the midst of conflict:

During a time of crisis in their community, a friend from the outside explained to them, "The way you grow into God's love isn't by making demands of each other. You do it by giving each other grace." Grace expressed as love "when it didn't seem fair, or reasonable," and "when others were being complete jerks."

Their wise advisor continued,

The truth is, we can't stand the idea of not fixing each other. But insofar as we can fix people at all, we can do it only by forgiving them, and giving them grace, and leaving them to our loving Father. Grace assumes sin. When we ask you to accept each other, we aren't asking you to ignore hurts between you. People of grace speak the truth. But in an atmosphere of grace, truth seems less offensive and more important.

(A church leader) describes the community's delight when it was introduced to the recipe for a "new culture of grace." The ingredients for life in community were surprisingly simple: "It is enough to get the love of God into your bones and to live as if you are forgiven. It is enough to care for each other, to forgive each other, and to wash the dishes."

When we more fully understand the grace we've received, we are able to turn outward in gratitude and generosity. Gratitude becomes "our home in the presence of God," or, in Henri Nouwen's words, an "intimate participation in the Divine Life itself" that "reaches out far beyond our own self to God, to all of creation, to the people who gave us life, love, and care."



## Allow Your Wonder to Wander

***Elder and retired pastor Wes Granberg-Michaelson views awe and wonder as resources to inspire us when we come to the end of our own knowing:***

When your rational certainty breaks down - as of course it will - give attention to where your soul, the integrated centre of your being, wanders. Where are you drawn? What do you long for? What gives you joy? What captures your curiosity? My guess is that you will be drawn to beckoning experiences of connection. These will likely include connections not only to people, but to the created world where experiences of awe and transcendence intersect with you in worship, music, art, and practices that unlock a fresh spiritual encounter opening your inner self to God's presence.

Those who are called mystics nearly always display an intimate sense of connection to the created world. Often this comes with striking particularity, like a reflection on a stone, or Julian of Norwich's vision of a hazelnut. Because mystics grasp the interconnection of all things, they perceive God's presence as comingled with all creation. Contemplation radicalizes the sense of God's presence in the world.

But you don't have to be Julian of Norwich or Thomas Merton to participate in this understanding of interconnectedness. The doorways that open the pathway of this experience will vary according to your life's setting and history. But in the shroud of intellectual uncertainty and doubt, you are likely to be drawn to experiences with nature that inspire transcendent awe.... You discover instances of inspiration and wonder that move beyond and beneath mere cognition.

Maybe your wandering time leads you on a wilderness hike when you cross a ridge and are awestruck by a shimmering alpine lake reflecting a snow-covered mountain peak like a mirror. Or maybe you happen upon a firefly at nightfall in your backyard, where that tiny, sudden light blinks up, rises, and settles on your arm. In simple and unexpected moments of epiphany, you will sense that you are connected to creation in ways that bypass your self-protective, preoccupied, rational mind. Your task? Be attentive. Allow your wonder to wander.

Granberg-Michaelson shares in a journal entry from his twenties how he was moved by the beauty of creation:

Whenever one is moved to awe by the beauty of creation, one is moved by God. God, the Creator of both the beauty, and of the inner feelings that excite the soul.

The inspiration we feel in the presence of beauty causes us to transcend ourselves, and in so doing, this is the testimony to the presence of God in the world. Regardless of one's intellectual view of God, when one is moved beyond him or herself, beyond a preoccupation with one's own being to the recognition of the greatness that is other than him or her, then the inward urge to worship and adore such beauty means one is being moved by God toward God.

