

Recognising Jesus – ?

Mark 1:1-11

Matthew, Mark, Luke and John all tell us about the man that we know as 'John the Baptist'. Mark's account of John's first appearance is probably the earliest and gives us the simple, straightforward story of the enormous impact that he made when he suddenly turned up in the open country next to the River Jordan. Mark tells us that all the people from Jerusalem and Judea were going out to see and hear him, and that many of them were confessing their sins and being baptised by him.

Baptisms were familiar to Jews at that time, as we saw when we looked at Nicodemus in **John 3**. This wasn't just being sprinkled with some water, this was going down into the water – right under – and then coming back up again, and it was a symbol of death and new life, a new beginning. That's why John needed to be by a substantial river, so that there was enough depth of water for people to be fully immersed. In fact, we read that John moved his base of operations later on to a place where there was 'plenty of water' (**John 3:23**) and, though we may call him 'John the Baptist', that name would have come over to the Jews at the time as 'Jochanan the Immerser'. He got his nickname because he became known for 'dunking' people!

But where had he come from? As usual, it is Luke who delved into the detail and did valuable and extensive research, and we can read about John's origins in **Luke 1**. There were other people called John, but not in the families of Zacharias and Elizabeth, and their relations were surprised that they chose that name.¹ Its meaning is significant. They were both getting old and had given up any hope of having any children, and it would have been really good for Zacharias to have a son to follow him into the Jewish priesthood. Both of them were descended from Aaron, the elder brother of Moses, who had been the first high priest all those generations ago when the Israelites had escaped from Egypt, and the priesthood was hereditary, so obviously John was destined to be a Jewish priest.

But his name means 'God is gracious' or, more specifically, 'God is a gracious giver'. Hardly surprising that both Zacharias and Elizabeth agreed on this name as they had received such a welcome gift in their later years!

Far from following his father into the priesthood, it seems that John may have started living in the desert from quite early in his life. Deserts are solitary places, not in the centre of community life as the life of a Jewish priest would have been. He had become 'strong in spirit' and he was certainly going to need that spiritual strength for the task that was ahead of him.

There is quite a lot in the New Testament about John the Baptist, and we may perhaps come back and look at him again, but let's concentrate on what may have been the first meeting between John and Jesus which is recorded for us . . .

John had been in the desert for some while when God began to give him a message and then had been drawing the crowds, calling them to have a radical re-think about their lives ('repent'), to receive forgiveness from God for what they had done wrong and to be baptised as a statement of making a new beginning. He didn't mince his words, either, especially not to the religious leaders!²

Matthew, Mark and Luke all link the coming of John to a prophecy made by Isaiah about 700 years earlier,³ making it clear that a 'messenger' would appear just before the arrival of the LORD's Anointed One, the expected Messiah.

John knew who he was. He was not the Messiah, he was not Elijah re-appearing as many expected. He didn't even claim to be a prophet. He simply described himself by quoting that same passage from **Isaiah 40** – someone sent ahead of the Lord making his appearance (**John 1:19-28**) – and he knew that the One who was coming after him was right there, in amongst the crowds, but as yet unknown.

¹ There was at least one 'John' in the priesthood a few years later (**Acts 4:6**), plus John the disciple and 'John Mark'. John was a Hebrew name, Mark (Marcus) a Roman one (**Acts 12:25**).

² See **Matthew 3:7-10**, **Luke 3:7-9**

³ **Isaiah 40:3**

We don't even know whether he and Jesus had known each other as they grew up and matured. John initially in a priest's household, a member of the tribe of Levi, living in the hilly area of Judah and most likely centred on Jerusalem for much of the time, where his father had been a priest and had presumably retired not long after John's birth. It was obvious to everyone what John would be when he grew up: he would be a priest, like his father. At the age of 30, he would be expected to assume his role as a priest in the Temple. Is that when he decided to 'escape' and move out into the solitude of the Jordanian desert?

Jesus, more than 60 miles north in Nazareth, was growing up as an apprentice in his (supposed) father's carpentry business. Jerusalem was the capital city, the hub of all things central to the Jewish faith. Nazareth was a despised town in a very marginal area, so marginal that people referred to it as 'Galilee of the Gentiles' – a real 'melting pot' of Jews and foreigners.

But Jesus' mother Mary was related in some way to Elizabeth, presumably through their mothers' families, as their fathers had belonged to different tribes of Israel, Levi and Judah. I wonder whether the young boys ever saw each other, or were even aware of each other's existence. No evidence either way!

But, when Jesus suddenly turns up at the Jordan and asks John to baptise him, it all begins to fall into place for John. He now knows that Jesus is the One who is coming after him, the One whose sandals John is not even worthy to untie. John is about 6 months older than Jesus, but he says *"This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'"* How did he know that? God had already told John that he would show him the Messiah by showing him the Holy Spirit coming down and remaining upon him. Probably the main reason that John had been sent to baptise was so that Jesus would start to be revealed to the Jewish people (**John 1:31**).

Did John recognise Jesus when he arrived? **John 1:33** shows that he didn't know for sure that he was the 'Coming One' until he saw the Holy Spirit coming down on him visibly and staying on him, but he obviously had some idea about him just before that, because of what he said to Jesus in **Matthew 3:14**.

After that, he had no hesitation in pointing out to anyone who would listen that Jesus was not only the Coming One, the Messiah. He called him 'the Lamb of God' who would take away the sin of the world. How did he know that? The passage in **Isaiah 53** spoke about the 'suffering servant' being like a lamb led to slaughter, but no-one was expecting the Messiah and that suffering servant to be the same person! Clearly, John was hearing from God! He made no claim to be a prophet, but Jesus described John as being 'a prophet and more than a prophet', the very last of the Old Testament prophets, and the one who would usher in the beginning of the message of the Kingdom of God (**Matthew 11:7-14, Luke 7:24-30**).

John's message was clear: 'Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has drawn near' (**Matthew 3:2**). He was leading in to Jesus declaring the same message in **Matthew 4:17**. He knew that his main task was over – to reveal Jesus – and that now he needed to fade out of the picture (**John 3:30**).

We could look at much more about John, but one of the most important things about him is that he didn't treat Jesus as just another ordinary person, or even greet him as his long-lost cousin! He saw Jesus in the light of what God had revealed to him, a spiritual appreciation and not just a natural one.

How do we recognise Jesus? Is it in some almost detached way, as a great teacher whose words we aim to follow? Paul says that he used to look at Jesus like that, from a natural, worldly point of view, but that now he sees him differently. To start with, of course, Paul saw Jesus as someone to be opposed, but that all changed when Jesus became real to him personally and Paul became a totally new person (**2 Corinthians 5:16-17**). That can be true for us, too!

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