

# *“According to Matthew”*

A study of the Gospel of Matthew

*Part 3: Baptized.*

It is AD28. Rumors are spreading through town that one of the Old Testament prophets has returned. It has been 400 years since Malachi, the last of the great prophets of the Old Testament, finished his book by writing **'But before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes, I will send you the prophet Elijah'** (Malachi 4:5)

Last session we pictured Matthew as a movie. We began with an impressive cast list. We witnessed a child born to be King, in the bosom of a humble family, welcomed by worldly wise men. We saw the terrible dying acts of the despot ruler Herod the Great who was everything a King was not meant to be. Now we are introduced to one who announces that a different kind of Kingdom is ready to dawn. His name is John. We know him as John the Baptist.

Matthew offers us more than just a story. He weaves everything together with prophecies of the Old Testament, even using numbers and symbolic images to present us with a particular theological view of Jesus Christ.

Part of that picture involves John the Baptist. To understand his importance to Matthew's story we need to jump forward to a verse that comes a few chapters later; Matthew 11:14. **“If you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who was to come”**

Matthew suggests that John is the one who fulfills the Elijah role. He is not suggesting John was Elijah re-incarnated. Rather that, returning to Malachi's words, John is the one who has task of announcing that the terrible (which should be interpreted not as terrible as in frightening, but rather terrible as in 'awesome') 'Day of the Lord' had arrived. His presence precedes the dawning of the new age!

## John's background

The gospel of Luke tells us that John was born into a priestly family. His father, Zechariah served in the temple. (Luke 1:5ff). As a male of the tribe of Aaron with a religious intent, John may well have trained for the priesthood. Somewhere along the way he felt a call to a very particular kind of ministry.

Some scholars link John with the Essenes desert monastic community. The classical scholar Josephus described the Essenes as the third strand of Jewish spirituality, along with the Pharisees and Sadducees. John certainly seemed to be shaken by the emptiness and ritualism of the religion of his day and may well have sought for a deeper religious experience amongst such a community.

In the text we are simply told that he lived in the wilderness, wearing camel skins and surviving on a diet of locusts and honey. By 'locusts' Matthew is most probably referring to the fruit of the Carob tree that is common to the region, rather than the grasshopper like insects associated with the plagues of Egypt. Its large red pods have been used for food for animal and man since prehistoric times. (I'm told locust beans taste a little like chocolate.) They are sometimes called "Saint John's Bread" because of the connection to the gospel story.

Matthew also links John the Baptists proclamation to the prophecies of Isaiah who spoke of one who would come from out of the wilderness declaring that it was time for people to straighten out their lives because something new was in the air.

Let us look at that text, Matthew 3:1-12

**Matthew 3:1** In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming,  
<sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."<sup>3</sup> This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" <sup>4</sup> Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey.

<sup>5</sup> Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>7</sup> But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup> Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.

<sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

John's message was stern and bold, echoing many of the Old Testament prophets who came before him. He condemns sin and calls the people to holiness and righteousness. Although some of it is more of the same that people had heard before he does strike some new notes.

Firstly there is a sense of **urgency**. Verse 2 '**The kingdom of heaven has come near**'. John urges the people to hurry. Repentance was something to be done now. No time to lose. This was the hour of salvation. He focuses his listener's attention not on some distant future, but their immediate situation.

One can not help but reflect that our present day Christianity lacks such an urgent note. Our motto can be; 'There's always tomorrow.' Yet we can't say that for sure. You can put things off for too long. Tomorrow may be too late. Today is the time to be right with

God. God's Kingdom is always near to us!

Secondly John urges **personal responsibility**. When he sees the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism he warns them to '**Bear fruit worthy of repentance**' because '**Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.**'

He stresses that religious position was not important. It was 'walking the talk' that counted. The only true spiritual path was one that showed itself in a changed life and sprang from an inner, personal commitment to God.

John sees faith not as something that can be inherited, but something to take personal responsibility for. "**Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.**"

There was a movie some years ago that had the title 'God has no grandchildren'. The premise of the film (made by evangelist Luis Palau and focussing on the spiritual decline of the church in Wales) was that at the end of the day; we all stand equal before God. God only has children, not grandchildren.

Though we may be influenced for good or bad by our parents, they don't determine our salvation. We are not saved or lost by *their* choices; we are saved or lost by *our* choices. A person's religious identity derives from claiming the faith for them self and is not ascribed by birth.

So John warns the religious folk of his day that being part of a great heritage didn't cut it. As folk belonging to the esteemed and influential tradition of Presbyterianism, the founders of nations and structures that have influenced the course of nations, we would be foolish to assume that the faith of the founding Fathers somehow guarantees our own spiritual destiny. We also need to make the faith our own.

Thirdly, John sees **baptism as a sign of preparation rather than initiation**. John was not the first to practice baptism. In other religious traditions 'passing through' water or being 'marked by water' was a way of being received into a religious tradition. John sees the baptism he offers as being a prelude to something greater that was to come. The baptized are urged to repent, in order that nothing will get in the way of their being embraced by God's coming kingdom.<sup>11</sup> "**I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.**"

There is an interesting passage in the book of Acts where Paul in his missionary journeys comes across a group of folk who had been amongst those baptized by John,

but whom had not yet heard the Christian gospel. Acts 19:4-5 **"Paul said, "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, telling the people to believe in the one who was to come after him, that is, in Jesus." <sup>5</sup> On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus."**

Such wide ranging uses of baptism within scripture has opened the way to the sacrament being practiced in differing ways amongst the Christian churches. Baptists as well as many Evangelical Protestant and Pentecostal traditions still lay great stress on repentance and starting over.

Other tradition's stress that baptism is a prelude to what is yet to come. Many see it as a form of initiation or new beginnings. Our own tradition takes this latter route. We offer baptism to both children and adults, seeing it as related to covenant theology... and the idea that our salvation is entirely dependant of the grace of God revealed to us in Jesus Christ; who claims all people, young and old, as His own.

What was the reaction to John's preaching? The crowds came. People wondered if he were the messiah. Word of his ministry even spread to Herod's palace, particularly when John rebuked him for marrying Herodias, his brothers wife. For such open criticism John is eventually imprisoned and executed.

John was regarded by Jesus as a truly great prophet. We will read later in our story Jesus telling the crowds; **"Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist"** (Matthew 11:11). But that is to come. Let us return back to our script as our drama reaches yet another significant milestone... Jesus comes down to the riverside... where John is baptizing:- Matthew 3:13-15

<sup>13</sup> **Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"**

<sup>15</sup> **But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.**

We know very little of Jesus childhood. For 30 years it is mostly veiled in silence. Although it is probable that His family went to Jerusalem on a number of occasions to participate in the feast days, it is not to Jerusalem that Jesus heads as His ministry begins, but to a meeting with His cousin John. Jesus asks to be baptized.

John objects and tries to talk Him out of it. Different commentators offer us differing interpretations as to why John is so reluctant to baptize Jesus. William Barclay suggests it was because Jesus was a Jew who had fulfilled all the requirements of the law. Others suggest it was because John had known Jesus since childhood and recognized Him as having nothing to repent of. Maybe it was a bit of both.

The link between John's reluctance and Jesus request is their deep humility. Jesus sees it

necessary to humble himself and identify completely with the state of humankind; lost, sinful and needing to change. He starts where we all start our spiritual journeys, recognizing our need for renewal and empowering.

John is humbled that one whom he had the highest admiration for would wish to be ministered to by him. Matthew Henry comments 'John's modesty thinks this an honor too great for him to receive, and he expresses himself to Jesus, just as his mother had done to Jesus mother Mary in Luke 1:43 *'And who am I that the mother of my Lord should come and visit me?'*

Jesus speaks of His baptism as being necessary to 'fulfill all righteousness'. Eugene Petersen in the Message captures well the sense of Jesus reply. He pictures Him saying; 'John, let's just do it. God's work, putting things right all these centuries, is coming together right now in this baptism.'

Barclay writes that 'This was the very moment for which Jesus had been waiting.' Because of John's baptism people were conscious of their need for God as never before. This was Jesus supreme moment of opportunity. In His baptism Jesus identifies himself with all those He came to save.

Let us read of the baptism itself: Matthew 3:16-17

**<sup>16</sup> And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. <sup>17</sup> And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."**

If 'According to Matthew' were a movie, as Jesus comes up out of the water we need to cue the special effects department. The heavens are opened. A voice is heard. The Spirit descends like a dove. This scene is filled with the sort of imagery that the original readers would have associated with the dawn of a new age.

It is also richly Trinitarian. Although the doctrine of the Trinity as an article of faith would not emerge till later centuries, the foundations for such teaching are all here in this passage. God the Father speaks of Jesus as the beloved Son and the Spirit descends. It's all the action of the One God, everything is related, yet there are three distinct entities involved. Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

We read of the '**Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on (him) Jesus**'. Throughout scripture the dove is invested with rich symbolic meaning.

In the book of Leviticus (1:14) the dove was associated with the burnt offering offered to the priests. The purpose of the burnt offering was a sacrifice to make atonement for the sin of the offerer so they could gain God's acceptance.

In John's gospel when John the Baptist describes Jesus to potential disciples he declares; *"Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"* (John 1:29). We saw previously in the gifts of the Wise Men the unusual gift of Myrrh, a spice associated with death and suffering. So the life of Jesus will be one of service and eventually offering Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.

In the Story of Noah it is a dove carrying an olive branch that returns to Noah bearing news that the floodwaters were at an end. So Jesus will declare that the time for God's Kingdom of peace to dawn had come. Matthew Henry points out that Spirit does not come as an eagle, which though a royal bird is a bird of prey, but as a dove, a creature of gentleness associated with peace.

There is verse in the Song of Solomon 2: 12 *'Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land.'* That God is in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, is a joyful message, which comes to us, as it were upon the wings of a dove.

In the story of creation in Genesis 1 we read: *'Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.'* (Gen 1:2). Whilst a dove is not particularly referred to, there is that whole notion of the Spirit descending and creating new life and order. It may be significant that back in chapter 1 Matthew's genealogy is phrased in terms that can be translated as the 'Genesis of Jesus'.

And then there are the words that are spoken; **"This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."** They come from within a rich scriptural tradition combining two passages. The first part of the verse comes from Psalm 2:7; *"I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."*

Psalm 2 pictures a mysterious character, the anointed one, who will bring about God's reign to a chaotic and disordered world. It is to this unidentified character that the words "You are my Son" are addressed.

Isaiah 42:1 reads *"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations."*

As we see the full quote from Isaiah it has deep meaning, revealing Jesus as being not only one with whom God is well pleased but also as the one on whom God's Spirit rests and who will bring justice to all the world. Rich imagery and rich words!

One of the characteristics of Matthew's gospel, and with scripture as a whole, seems to be that the deeper you dig the more there is to see, particularly in the way different scriptures relate to one another. This is all the more remarkable when you consider the

different time periods and cultures that gave birth to the words.

Yet every book has its own character and message. And Matthew is no exception. He has in mind to give us a particular picture of Jesus Christ and place His life within a particular framework.

We began with what we earlier described as the genesis of Jesus, a list of ancestors carefully designed to reveal Jesus as intimately related to the destiny of the nation. We explored with Matthew the nature of power and the despotic rule of Herod the Great. We glimpsed the dawn of something new in the birth of Jesus. We have been down to the river and yet more has been revealed. The Kingdom is near.

Next time we'll leave the cool waters and head with Jesus into the heat of the desert sun and some devilish temptations. Putting it that way sounds like an ad for the Las Vegas tourist board. I make no apologies. If I can tempt you to continue your journey through Matthew, my task has been accomplished.

