

## The Readings

These readings also include something from Josephus, who recorded that John the Baptist lived and how he met his end at the hands of Herod Antipas.

### John's Mission and Message

Reading 1 - The Announcement and Birth of John the Baptist Lk 1.5-25

Reading 2 - John the Baptist appears Mt 3.1-6, Mk 1.2-6, Lk 3.1-6, Jn 1.6,23

Reading 3 - John's Public Preaching and Repentance Mtt 3.7-10, Lk 3.7-9

Reading 4 - John's Reply to the Questioners Lk 3.10-14, Jn 1.19-23

Reading 5 - John's testimony: his relationship to Christ Mt 3.11-12, Mk 1.7-8, Lk 3.15-17, Jn 1.24-28

Reading 6 - Jesus' testimony about John Mt 11.2-19, Lk 7.18-35,16.16, John 5.35, Matthew 28.19 – the baptism of the kingdom

Reading 7 - Herod's opinion on Jesus: the Death of John the Baptist Mt 14.1-12, Mk 6.14-29, Lk 9.10-17, Leviticus 18.16; 20.21.

Reading 8 - John and the coming of Elijah Mt 17.9-13, Mk 9.9-13

Reading 9 - Jesus' Authority linked to source of John's Baptism Mt 21.23-32, Mk 11.27-33, Lk 20.1-8

Reading 10 - Paul at Ephesus: Twelve Men baptised Acts 18.24-end;19.1-7

Reading 11 - Josephus on John the Baptist, taken from "Antiquities of the Jews" XVIII.5.2

"Now, some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist; for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing [with water] would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away [or the remission] of some sins [only] but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified by righteousness.

Now, when many others came in crowds about him, for they were greatly moved [or pleased] by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion [ for they seemed ready to do anything he should advise, thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it should be too late. Accordingly, he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was put there to death. Now the Jews had an opinion that the destruction of his army was sent as a punishment upon Herod, and a mark of God's displeasure against him."

[Macherus was a powerful stronghold, a fortress and also a palace. It was situated on the eastern shores of the Dead Sea]

Reading 12 – The ministry of Elijah the prophet 1 Kings 17- 2 Kings 2

Reading 13 – The prophecy of the Lord sending Elijah the prophet – Malachi 4

## [1] The focus of the Gospels

In studying the Gospels, we are surely right to say that the focus of all of them is Jesus of Nazareth. And as we continue in our series, we would not wish to take any of the focus from Jesus. So why are we looking very closely at the person of John the Baptist? The quick answer is that we must do so because the Gospels themselves do so. John has an unparal-

## The Readings

## 1 - Gospel focus

leaded position in the Gospel writings.

Why is the narrative of John's birth given in such detail? Luke obviously felt that the purpose he had set out in instructing Theophilus, could not be adequately stated without a record of John's birth, ministry and death containing all the detail that he could find. See also Luke 3.1ff where the introduction of the historical integration with time is referred to as beginning with John the Baptist. This was the way to prepare and qualify the man who was to be the forerunner of the Lord.

The express statements of Jesus directed the Gospel writers to include him.

And when we come to focus a whole study on John it is because Jesus reserved for him, and only him, such commendation and interpretation of where he stood in the plan of things.

Concerning Luke 7.24-35, our Lord asked the crowd three questions, summarises their answers and then gives the only commentary on a human life that He ever gave. [Mark 14.9 being a forward looking prophecy; and Luke 21.4 as an exposition of the poor widow's circumstances and motive].

The Lord defended John; He spoke of his character; and gave His own judgement of John's place in history. It was the most impressive statement Jesus had ever made about any man. For Jesus there was no greater than John, no one surpasses him.

## 2 – The circumstances of John's conception and birth

2.1 In the days of king Herod the great [BC37-4]

2.2 Zacharias and Elizabeth are both righteous in respect of their performance, barren and elderly. Both are of a priestly lineage. She is one of "the daughters of Aaron" [Lk 1.5] and he belongs to one of the sons of Eleazar, who gave his name to the 8th of the 24 courses into which the priests were divided. They live in a city of the hill country of Judea [1.39]. Whilst performing his duties in temple.

2.3 Gabriel appears at the right of the altar of incense. Fear grips Zacharias at the appearance of the angel. He is not to fear because it is really good news:

[a] his prayers have been heard [for a son or the kingdom?]

[b] Elizabeth will bear a son and he is to call his name John

[c] result will be joy and gladness for them, and many will rejoice at his birth, neighbours and relatives [1.58]. See the way people had formerly spoken of Elizabeth all the past years [1.36], which is why she waits until the fifth month, when her pregnancy begins to be showing [1.24-5]; this is the taking away of her disgrace.

[Elizabeth has had no child; and yet in society's eyes she should have, this is to her a reproach and John the Baptist's conception alleviates it; by contrast, Mary, has a child when it is not appropriate in the eyes of society. Both are women of faith; in differing circumstances.]

2.4 Who the child will be is stated

[a] will be great in the eyes of the Lord

[b] drink no wine of liquor

[c] filled with the Holy Spirit while in the womb [1.41]

2.5 What the child will do is stated

[a] turn back [epistrepho] many Israelites to their God

[b] he will be a forerunner before God, in the spirit and power of Elijah

[c] turn the hearts of fathers back to the children [Mal 4.6] = the disobedient to the attitude of the righteous. Here the present generation of the older ones are seen to be in the wrong position with the Lord [Compare with Zechariah 1.3-6]. John, in preparing the current generation will bring them to a unity of readiness for the coming Saviour.

## 2 - John's conception and birth

[d] and this turning back will constitute a "making ready" a people prepared for the Lord.

What the angel records here is the birth of a supreme prophet who will in his person, state the message of the whole of the Old Testament, make clear the holiness of God and call for a conversion to Him. He will bring the hope of such a message and also the threat of it. Yet, this great prophet will only be the precursor of Another.

In this way the ministry of the Baptist is looking forward [as the friend of the bridegroom] to the coming of Another. Similarly this will give us a clue that the baptism which he brings to Israel will be a preparation for them to receive the Messiah. Some of the early disciples of Jesus, Andrew is one example, [Jn 1.35,37,40] were at first disciples of John. John saw himself "decreasing", and so pointed them away from himself to Jesus, who he saw as one who must "increase" [Jn. 3.30].

2.6 Zacharias, although righteous as to ritual performance, proves to be unbelieving; for he considered the old age and the barrenness of Elizabeth's womb. Notice the sharp contrast with his forefather Abraham, as Paul develops it in Romans 4.18-20. We have noted the embarrassment of Joseph at the time of the conception of Jesus. In that place it was as a judgement of God upon all men and women; it signalled that the coming of the Christ child was a matter in which a man was not permitted to be engaged. That he did not sire Jesus was a matter for Joseph's faith. He needed to believe that God was doing something of His own, and in such a way as his part was to stand by and take no initiative in regard to the conception of this child. The Lord, the Holy Spirit, was there before him – the child was conceived and Joseph is presented with an accomplished fact.

However, in the case of Zacharias, we also have a judgement, but this time upon the man himself; and in the same context – the matter of faith. It was Zacharias' refusal to believe what the angel said that brought upon himself the discipline of the Lord for a time. In his case the discipline is located within his own behaviour and life's walk with the Lord. In Joseph's case there is a wider participation in what God is doing in respect of all people. In Elisabeth and Zacharias' case it puts an end to their social shame – in Joseph's case, the conception of Jesus begins for him a long series of events which constitutes misunderstanding and suffering for him.

Notice also the comparison of Zacharias with Mary, and that neither the slowness of Zacharias to believe, nor the readiness of Mary to do so does not thwart the action which is alone the initiative of God.

[a] I am Gabriel = God's mighty messenger. As we shall see, he is usually a messenger of gracious announcements. [See Note 1.]

[b] standing in the presence of God [See Note 2.] = the angel is not offended, but it is God that is so offended.

[c] the chastisement afflicted on Zacharias is also the sign to him which he required.

2.7 Elizabeth, in her sixth month, is visited by Mary [Lk 1.39-45] who has just heard of the conception of Jesus within her.

[a] the babe in her womb leaped

[b] Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke out the meaning of what she had registered within her: it was John's joy at Mary's greeting. So here we have Elizabeth speaking out the experience of the child, who is the real speaker and registerer of the presence of the Lord's mother. She blesses Mary, the child Jesus, whom she acknowledges as her Lord [ie God], the same Lord who spoke to Mary. She acknowledges Mary's faithful reception of the word of the Lord through Gabriel [1.26].

[c] Mary stayed three months with Elizabeth, departing just before John was born [Lk 1.56].

**3 – The Holy Spirit and these two conceptions and births**

**3 - The Holy Spirit at work**

We saw that the two conceptions have an aspect of judgement attached to the two men in question. Matters are different for Zacharias, the man of unfruitful intercourse, whose reception of the word of God is unbelieving than they are for Joseph, the man who has no union with Mary and judges her circumstance to be improper towards himself, but, nevertheless is a man of faith in regards to God's word about her conceiving.

What we should not miss is Luke's clear emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit both at the conception of John and also of Jesus. With John, we understand that Elisabeth registers his movement within her womb at the arrival of Mary, who is also carrying Jesus. Luke speaks of this as an indication of what he often refers to a person as being "full of the Holy Spirit". The way he uses this expression in Luke-Acts is to bear witness that the action the person has just taken is under the direct movement and drive of the Holy Spirit.

John's conception is not miraculous insofar that it comes about as the result of normal intercourse. The timing is wonderful in that it coincides with the promise of the angel in respect of Zacharias and Elisabeth – it is the end of their social shame. But in John's case the word of God is active, as to promise, as it is in the case of all conceptions. God is the author of both conceptions.

In the case of Jesus' conception however, we are introduced to the work of the Holy Spirit as "overshadowing" Mary. An expression reminiscent of the Exodus cloud which enveloped the Hebrews in God's action and work, and yet denoted the presence of God without the seeing of Him. Indeed, the angel speaks in such a way that we are left in no doubt that the overshadowing of Mary by the Holy Spirit is directly connected with the understanding that the child born is "Son of God". Here, some have emphasised that this is a participation in the very being of God.

**4 - John the Baptist's Birth and growth to a man [Lk 1.66,80]**

**4 - John becomes a man**

4.1 The neighbours and relative rejoice with Elizabeth at what they see as the mercy of the Lord to her [Lk 1.57-58]. From the point of view of Elizabeth, the arrival of John is a wonderful release for his mother from disgrace and barrenness.

4.2 From Zacharias' position it is the release from a chastisement. On the eighth day, circumcision day, "they" [the extended family and neighbours], gather and intend to call him Zachariah. Elizabeth, who must have been speaking for Zachariah all the time of his dumbness, indicated that the child be called John, and then when the father was consulted, he confirmed it.

4.3 All over the hill country these circumstances brought people to wonder, and to fear. The awesome matter was talked about.

4.4 Zacharias was filled with the Spirit and he prophesied. The prophecy divides into two parts;

[a] How God has visited his people, raised up a horn of salvation [= a power for salvation] in the house of his servant David. This salvation is a "redemption" [1.68] and it will mean salvation from Israel's "enemies" and deliverance from the hand of those "that hate us" [1.70-71,74].

As such it is a mercy shown toward the forefathers, it is a remembrance by God of his holy covenant which he swore to Abraham [Gen 22.16-18]. Zacharias understands this to mean that they would be delivered from their enemies so that they might serve God without fear. And such a service would be in righteousness and holiness all their days.

[b] A prophecy over his son's life. He says that John will be called prophet of the most High because he will go before the Lord [Mal 3.1] to prepare His ways. What God is doing is giving his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins. [Ephesians 1.7]. And all this is an evidence of the "tender mercy of our God". It is the rising of the Sun with healing in its wings [Mal 4.2]; this Sun will shine upon those who are in darkness and the shadow of

death [Is 9.2], God will guide us into the way of peace [59.8].

We should not miss the words he is using; words such as salvation, deliverance, and redemption, all of which trade on all the powerful images of the Old Testament. There are remembrances of the covenant to Abraham, and the coming to serve God without fear. A service of righteousness and holiness.

There is a new element in the arrival of John. He will prepare for something and Someone else that God is bringing after John. The salvation will be about the forgiveness of sins. It will be the arrival of peace with God.

## 5 - John's Appearance; His public Mission

5.1 If the "fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar" was AD 25-26, then this is the date for the beginning of the Baptist's public ministry. [See Note 3.]

5.2 The beginning of the preaching of the kingdom.

The sequence of dates which Luke heaps up [Lk 3.1-2a] is designed to introduce the expression "the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness". This would be the wilderness of Judea. So the coming of the Lord's ministry Luke wants to begin in history with the advent of John - the one who precedes Him. The interlocking of the stories of the two men is unmistakable from the outset. [See Note 4.]

The same is true for Mark [Mk 1.2-6]. Whether we take Mark 1.1 as a title or an introduction, the point remains unchanged that Mark wants us to understand that the ministry of the Lord is ushered in by this friend of the bridegroom.

The preaching of the good news, the preaching of the kingdom of God is dated from the reaching of John the Baptist [Lk 16.16]. Jesus dates the kingdom of God as open, unprotected from robbers and lying in the street, as it were, so that "violent men take it by force", open to anyone, easy prey; and He dates this from the days of John the Baptist. He also makes it clear that the prophets and the Law were until John [Mt 11.12-13]. Acts 1.22 dates the Lord Jesus going in and out among his disciples as dating from the baptism of John. We cannot detach the history of Jesus from that of the Baptist - it is clear in the way the Gospels present the material.

5.3 He is a voice crying in the wilderness. The text from Isaiah 40.3-5 in Luke's case, and Ex 23.20, Mal 3.1 and Is 40.3 in Mark's case all indicate the preparatory work of John in getting the people ready for the coming of the Lord.

The picture of a king coming in his glory in Isaiah is of the preparation to be made for a conquering king who has subjugated the peoples who are before Him. The ride to the conquered people's cities were to be made smooth lest the king should arrive in a mood which would fair badly for the peoples.

John's work here is about the gracious visit of Jesus Christ, who is good news to a conquered and exhausted people. It is consistent with God's people finding that their iniquity is removed and their warfare ended [Is 40.1-2]. It is however, about a capturing of their hearts. It is about a visitation to the people of God who are under the discipline of their Sovereign. Consequently the preparation of the highway of God in the wilderness has to do with a baptism which is looking forward ["unto"] the remission of their sins. In this way John is a "voice" in the wilderness. Wilderness in the double sense, of Judea, and also of the ceaseless wanderings of God's people who long for Him to relieve them of their hard service, which is a sign to them of the displeasure of God upon their life.

5 - John's appearance & mission

6 - John's message

## 6 - John's Message: he preached "the kingdom was at hand"

6.1 According to Mt 3.2 what is about to break in is the "kingdom of heaven" = the

establishment on the earth of a divine rule which is already operative in heaven.

6.2 What breaks in is also God's judgment. The axe is laid to the root of the tree; and of the fruit is not good, then it is laid on the fire. [Mt 3.10, Lk 3.9]. People could not escape this judgement by appealing to the lineage of Abraham as their father [Mt 3.9, Lk 3.8]. To some he was seen as a grim Elijah figure, distant, hard and ascetic [Mk 1.6ff, Mt 11.18].

6.3 What also comes is God's wonderful mercy in the form of remission, the legally effective taking away, the setting aside of the sins of Israel. Not as sins overlooked, but as sins which are brought under the grace of God [Mk 1.4, Lk 1.77, 3.3].

6.4 He came in the "way of righteousness" as a preacher of God's rectifying and redeeming righteousness. The publicans and the harlots believed him [Mt 21.32]. John gave those who believed special instruction as to what this knowledge meant for them in their practical experience [Lk 3.11]

6.5 His birth was a joyous event, hailed with jubilation nevertheless. And his preaching is expressed as "good news" [Lk 3.18]. And the use of Isaiah 40.3 indicates not a catastrophe but powerful relief which God was bringing about.

6.6 So we see a coming kingdom, a coming judgement, the coming forgiveness of sins; all brought about by God's righteousness. This is the message which Jesus would have heard from John and to which He submitted Himself along with many in Israel at the time. In preparing for it Jesus had himself baptised.

6.7 Readiness for this coming kingdom can only mean renewal, and renewal implies conversion, and conversion implies repentance.

## 7 - "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Mt 3.2

7.1 The preaching of John begins with an imperative, a command, "repent". This involves a man turning to God and a life which follows from that turning as lived towards his fellow man. We have already seen that such a life of repentance involved a renewed way of practical living [Lk 3.10ff].

7.2 When a person repents he declares that God is right; he justifies God and shows that He is true. This is what is involved in the responding to John's preaching - it would begin the readiness which was required. And while the crowds and the publicans prepared the Pharisees and the scribes did not [Lk 7.29ff].

7.3 The conversion looked towards something - it was a baptism of repentance "unto the remission of sins" [Mk 1.4]. while some fled to John out of fear [Mt 3.7ff, Lk 3.7ff] this does not admit that God is right. A man admits that God is right by repentance for this is a vindication of God against oneself and leads to the "confessing of their sins" [Mk 1.5, Mt 3.6]. In this way, John's preaching was not the imparting of forgiveness, it was the readying of people for that forgiveness which would come through Another.

7.4 Baptism in water then looked forward to the forgiveness. And it was their statement that they were in need of thorough cleansing and awaited it.

7.5 Jesus came and as all the people were being baptised [Lk 3.21] He came and vindicated God instead of Himself too. He didn't flee His judgement, in fact, the sinlessness of Jesus demonstrated itself in that He made this confession of sins also. More of this next session

## 8 - John's relationship to Jesus: "After me comes One ...."

8.1 'The relationship between John and Jesus ... resembles two stars following each other at a short distance, and both passing through a series of similar circumstances. The announcement of the appearing of one follows closely on the appearing of the other. It is the same with their two births. This relation repeats itself in the commencement of their respective ministries; and lastly in the catastrophes which terminate their two lives. And yet, in the

*7 - Repent because the kingdom of heaven is near*

*8 - John and Jesus*



whole course of the career of these two men, there was but one personal meeting - at the baptism of Jesus" Godet, Luke Vol 1 p185

8.2 An element in the preaching of John which we have kept until now was His preaching of Another who was to come after him. He announced this Man, this other one, when he announced the coming of the kingdom, the coming judgement, and the coming remission of sins.

8.3 His relationship to Jesus was that

[a] John was not the light, but came to bear witness to the Light [Jn 1.8]

[b] John is the prophet of the most High, yet he is to go before the coming One [Lk1.76]; John is the forerunner, the precursor described in Mal 3.1 and Isaiah 40.3.

[c] John points to Jesus [bears witness to Him] as the one who comes after him but who was before him [Jn 1.15,30,34].

8.4 While John baptises with water, He, the coming One will baptise in the Holy Spirit [and with fire Lk 3.16]. The coming One is He who will execute the judgement.

8.5 In the light of this One John wants us not to overestimate himself or his baptism with water. John must decrease and Jesus increase [Jn 3.30]; he is the friend of the Bridegroom who is really glad to hear his voice [3.29]. 6.6 And the reason John came baptising with water was so that this One might be manifested to Israel [3.31] and that Israel might take the right attitude to this event. He says he didn't know before about Jesus [3.31,33], saw the Spirit come on Him [3.32ff] and recognised Him as the One who would baptise in the Holy Spirit [3.33], the Son of God [3.34], the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world [3.30,36]. He bore witness to Him by coming baptising with water.

8.6 John baptised a "baptism of repentance" and called people to believe on Jesus who came after him [Acts 19.4-6] - in this way the conversion which John required was to faith in Jesus. This is demonstrated by the way Paul deals with the men at Ephesus.

## 9 – The turning point of the Baptism of Jesus in the river Jordan by John.

We shall come to look at this event from the perspective of Jesus and His own work later – but it is clear from the Gospels that the effect of baptising Jesus made for a profound change in John the Baptist's person and message.

Mark 1.9

- Jesus had come directly from Nazareth in Galilee to be baptised by John

- synoptic Gospels, Matthew Mark and Luke, confine their records of John's message to what he said before the baptism of Jesus. Whereas it is from John's Gospel that we learn of what the Baptist said after the baptism of Jesus.

The baptism of Jesus brought change into John the Baptist's person and ministry.

Matthew 3.13-17

- Initially John was not happy to baptise Jesus, rather thinking of himself as needing Jesus to baptise him.

- Jesus asked him to permit it now at this time. This would fulfil all righteousness. He linked his baptism with his crucifixion. John would be the instrument for the beginning of that walk to Jerusalem.

- As Jesus came out of the water the heavens opened and John saw something which he recognised he had been told would happen.

## 9 - Baptising Jesus in the Jordan

## 10 – John's Statements about Jesus prior to the Baptism.

[1] John's understanding of the Kingdom of God.

After 400 years of real silence about the programme of God as expressed among the prophets, John breaks into the history of Israel, linking himself to Malachi and Isaiah, confident that he is the messenger who was prophesied by them [John 1.23]. A fact that the Lord subsequently verified [Mark 9.12-13].

- The picture of Isaiah 40.3 is that of a great governing personage coming to pay a visit to those who have come under his power and authority. They level the pathways, so that his ride to them is comfortable, they clean up the city, they prepare a welcome which is appropriate for this great person. John's view of the kingdom of God is that it is of such importance as to be without parallel.

- It's scope is universal, "all flesh shall see the salvation of God". Isaiah's vision is clearly adapted by John, he believes it is coming for his ministry demanded baptism for all, both established Jews and their leaders and common sinners. Later, his testimony of Jesus as the lamb of God is that He will deal with the bearing of the sins of the world.

Practically speaking, John understood that the preparations for the coming of the kingdom of God were personal and really an affair of the heart, which led to obedience. He understood the consequences for the nation if they did not adhere to and obey his message. He was preaching a message which was directed to the preparation for a life changing arrival of the kingdom.

- It is something we understand that God instructed him about during his days in the desert places. In this way we see the Baptist as a person not unlike Elijah and Jonah. He saw the coming judgement of God, the "axe was already laid to the root of the tree" [Matt 3.10]. The one coming was as a farmer at harvest with a fan in his hand, separating the wheat from the chaff on his threshing floor [Matt 3.12]. The chaff would be burned in unquenchable fire.

[2] His preaching presumed a clear understanding of sin. It drove for, repentance, baptism and public confession. [Matthew 3.1-6; Luke 3.7-15]

The Pharisees and the Sadducees were addressed directly as "snakes" and John asked "who warned you of the wrath to come?" [Matthew 3.7]. He knew where their sin was located, it was 'within themselves' [Matt 3.9] – their hypocrisy was clear to him, and he said so.

In his teaching about repentance, baptism in water and confession which showed how he viewed the issue of sins as fundamental to engaging the kingdom.

It was this that the Pharisees could not abide – and later in his life Jesus makes the issue sharp with the counter-question to the chief priests and elders who questioned his authority, "the baptism of John, was it from heaven or men?" [Matt 21.25]. Indicating that the baptism of John could not under any circumstance be ignored. And if it was, then the reception of Jesus would be equally affected as well.

## 11 – John's statements about Jesus after the Baptism.

John, the writer of the Gospel which takes his name, was a disciple of John the Baptist. In John 1.15 we see that John is primarily a witness to Jesus Christ. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. In the wilderness, he had already heard from God certain matters about the One who was coming. It had to do with what he would see when that person was baptised in water.

After the baptism of Jesus by John, the preacher of repentance and baptism and confession reveals that he had a mission entrusted to him to bear witness of the One upon whom the Holy Spirit came and remained. Both his message and his person were changed – the messenger became a witness and, appropriately, the message became a testimony. He bears witness to the atoning work of Christ, and the deity of His Person, and his relation to the church.

**10 - What John said about Jesus before His Baptism**

**11 - What John said about Jesus before His Baptism**

**God's initiative**



These are found in the titles of Christ Lamb of God, Son of God, and calling himself the friend of the Bridegroom.

**[1] The Lamb of God – the Atonement of Christ**

John knew about the deep nature of sin. The designation of Jesus as the Lamb of God means that the stern one who is the last, and greatest of the prophets is now bringing a message of universally available atonement. We have the foremost evangelist of the kingdom here. The nation has given place to the world.

It took Peter, and the rest of the apostles of Christ a long time to embrace the universal outreach of the gospel of gracious atonement [Acts 11.18] but John the Baptist is the first to say it as linked to the person of Jesus and does so before any of the gospel facts have come to light.

This Lamb of God occurs 4 times in NT [except in the book Revelation where it is a major theme x27]. Twice here, once in Acts 8.32 and then in 1 Peter 1.19.

Isaac's question of "where is the lamb?" is answered by Abraham, that God would provide one [Genesis 22.8]. Jesus as the provision of God as his own Lamb to deal with the sin of the whole world.

The paschal Lamb whose blood was shed as the basis for the Passover being enacted on the Jewish people in Egypt is clear to our mind, as is Isaiah 53.7 which speaks of a sheep before his shearers is dumb and led to the slaughter. All this connected with the dealing with sin.

This Lamb "bears away the sin of the world".

*Lamb of God*

**[2] The Son of God [John 1.34] - the Deity of Christ.**

We have come to see that the deity of Christ as being truly God is the earliest area of debate with the world about Jesus. John is in advance of that. And it is from him that the church has the earliest statements of such things about Jesus.

These two designations expound the revelation of the love of God to men and women.

John did not know the person he says to whom these statements applied [John 1.33-34] – he says, "I knew Him not". But John did know from God that when he saw the Holy Spirit descend and remain, then this One would baptise in the Holy Spirit and is called Son of God.

*Son of God*

**[3] The One who baptises in the Holy Spirit.**

John is a person who was filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb. His parents had much to tell him about that matter; for it was prophesied over him before his birth [Luke 1.15]. The Person of the Holy Spirit was no stranger to John. He knew this of Jesus before He saw the Spirit descend upon Him. So he understood that this baptising in the Holy Spirit was a matter of the kingdom before hand.

John understood the Holy Spirit and expressed it so under two clear, but contrasting, symbols – the Dove [Matt 3.16] and Fire [Matthew 3.11].

The dove speaks of the gentle work of God in regard to men and women. The particular bird is gentle and quiet, unassertive. It is the mark of the man who is filled with the Spirit that they are humble to God's will, quiet, and not quarrelsome. It was the word of the Saviour that He was meek and lowly of heart [Matt 11.29]. It will be the disciple of John the Baptist, John, the gospel writer, who will tell us of the Holy Spirit as the Comforter, and the Spirit of truth.

*baptizer in the Holy Spirit*

The fire answers to the OT pictures of the judgement of God upon all that is within us which is dross and less than that for which he has made and redeemed us. At Pentecost this fire rested on each person and was seen as a tongue of fire; whether it refers to their testimony and spoken word, or whether it testifies to their own life as being purified by God the Holy Spirit's work within and among them.

**[4] The Bridegroom [John 3.25-30]**

*The bridegroom*

When appraised of the success which Jesus was having in drawing and baptising many people John makes clear that he, himself, is not jealous of this attachment of people to Jesus. He takes a view of himself as one who has brought together the people and Jesus, and now that He is launched, as it were, then it is for John to decrease himself, and to see Jesus go on and increase.

We notice that the Baptist did not join the ranks of the disciples of Jesus. He carried on a separate ministry, and retained most of his own disciples. And he did this while at the same time Jesus was working in the same area. This would seem very odd except for the fact that the Baptist understood himself as the friend of the bridegroom – he understood his mission, and that his work was close to completion.

**12 – The decrease of John the Baptist [Matthew 11.11; Luke 7.28]**

*12- John goes offstage*

As we have seen, this is a 'decrease' as compared with the 'increase' of Jesus in respect of the people that are attending Him.

We have also had in the background of our thinking the evaluation of the Lord of John's ministry and where he fits in history. Matthew 11.11 first states that, "among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist". There is the counterpart to this, that "he that is least [little] in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he".

Clarified in that the Baptist has no knowledge of the Resurrection and Ascension. In this is the strong contrast with those who are least in the kingdom of heaven who do know these things and participate in the power of the salvation won for them by Christ.

**13 – John as a pivotal person for the kingdom of God**

*13 - John closes an era*

• John's ministry closed an era in the estimation of Jesus. "The law and the prophets were until John, since that time the kingdom of God is preached, and every man presses into it. [Luke 16.16].

• When Luke [3.1ff] relates how the history of Jesus integrates with time as we know it he starts with Pontius Pilate Herod etc and then the text goes on to speak of John, the son of Zacharias.

• According to Matthew 11.12 the kingdom of God is wide open, exposed to any one who wanted to press into it, and exposed to all. This did not begin after John, but with him. The qualification for the replacement of Judas required someone as witness "from the Baptism of John [Acts 1.22].

• Jesus rebuke of the high priests, elders and scribes was that if John's baptism was from heaven then Jesus' authority is established.

**14 – The discussion concerning Elijah after the Transfiguration**

*14 - John as Elijah*

Mark has a discussion recorded after the Transfiguration of Jesus on the mountain. The disciples ask about the prophetic implication that Elijah must first come before the kingdom can come. Jesus implies that Elijah has, in fact, come and they did to him whatever they wished to do.

• This would have stirred in the disciples minds comparisons of John with Elijah. There were striking likenesses.

Both had a charismatic style of ministry in which their persons alone were the focus of the major demands of the hour.

Both were living under the influence of a weak king who was manipulated by a strong

and dangerous woman.

Both were fearless and holy men, maintaining a rugged and desert life style, who from the desert places where they communicated with God broke in on the peoples lives.

Both were very strong on the call to repentance and the need to decide whether God was God in the eyes of Israel.

Both encountered demonic forces on behalf of Israel.

• There is a striking difference however, between John and Elijah; and these differences mark the change of order of the kingdom of God.

Elijah battled the spiritual issues for Israel at a time when there was an actual king over Israel and the state was the instrument of the expression of the kingdom of God. He was, as the time of his ascension revealed, "the chariots of Israel and Israel's horsemen" – he was the saviour figure of his country. At Elijah's intersection with the state powers he was a prophet attended by God with stunning miracles which attested to the meeting of power with power – as the battle raged.

John came at a time when the kingdom of God has slipped into the world as a rule which will be established in the hearts of men and women with gentleness and grace. It would be the work of a Saviour who would save this people from their sins. And the kingdom would not be a matter of empire and state – it would come gently in such a way that the humility of its coming would mean that men and women of force, could overwhelm it in their time. John bears witness of this – he has great impact upon the people for their hearts and minds, but is overwhelmed and dispatched at the hands of a wilful woman and a weak king who made foolish vows on the spur of the moment. The death of John seems such a waste, such an ignoble end, but it is, in Jesus teaching of the kingdom means that they "did with him what they wanted". In this sense, Jesus and John both bear witness to the same issue of establishing salvation in the midst of weakness.

As they come off the mount of Transfiguration, where Jesus is established for them as the man of history who stands in the line of Moses and Elijah; and yet they have just heard the Father address them that Jesus is the main saviour of which these others are just anticipatory figures. In the light of this to think of Elijah as a figure despatched by Herodias and Herod Antipas is bizarre. And yet that is the kingdom – being pressed into by force.

## 15 - Practical salvation shown in the life of Jesus

• The Lord has saved us by his submission to the prophetic voice as he found it in his life time. In this way He is a model of what we shall do in our life time.

• From John the Baptist, we learn of a man who had heard the voice of the Lord through the prophetic material which accompanied his life in regards to his birth and ministry. These came through his father, and surrounding folks. The Lord brought the meaning of John's life to bear upon him as he listened to his father's prophetic word, and later as he listened for himself to the voice of the Lord in the desert.

• From Jesus we learn that the salvation of men and women involved the saviour in submitting to the ministry of a human man, through whom it pleased his Father to bring the word of God to himself.

• Each of us is faced with this need to come to terms with prophetic ministry. Each of us, in our lifetime have had persons through whom God has brought the word of God. Sometimes it has taken shape through different ministries

• The importance of being faithful where and when you are born. Jesus free to be confined into a historical setting. We also.

## 15 Practical matters

## The High Priest at the time

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