

“MEETING THE MAIN MAN”
“Let Me Introduce you – John the Baptist”
Matthew 3:1-17

Jesus the Christ – the person at the very heart of our faith. Indeed, the person without whom there would be no faith. The person from whom we take our name as his followers: Christ-ians. The person whose towering figure stands at the very crux of history, whose thirty year life and three year ministry was the most influential that there has ever been. After those three years, nothing could ever be the same again. He was there at the dawn of time and will one day return to usher in the climax of the eternal Kingdom of God. He is acknowledged by many as the greatest teacher who ever lived and reviled by many as the root of all kinds of problems and difficulties that we are still dealing with today. He is acknowledged by all other religions as a significant figure in philosophy, ethics, spirituality, politics and wisdom, and worshipped by billions as a god, a shaman, a heavenly messenger, a healer, an angel. No-one (at least, no-one with any sense) denies that he lived but wars have been fought over what he said and did. His titles are many – Saviour, Lord, King, Shepherd, Healer, Teacher, Lamb, Lion, Way, Life, Rabbi, Avenger.

And each of us here this morning will have a different opinion about him. But, of course, we'll probably agree on the essentials and acknowledge the difficulties inherent in the details, and there will be a great deal of consensus. Many of us will claim to have encountered him, to have felt, sensed his presence, heard his voice, even seen visions of him. We'll all have a different story about his effect in our life, his influence over our choices, his promises and blessings to us. And if we had time, we'd all find something, I'm sure, that we could add to any portrait that we tried to paint of him. But who is he? Who is this colossus who lived and died and, some say, lived again? What difference does his coming into our world two thousand years ago make to our life today?

Well, over the next few weeks we're going to have a look at Jesus and his life, his teaching, his effect on others. We're not going to look at him through the words of the books of systematic theology (although we may come to the same conclusions). We're not going to formulate a description of him that would sit neatly in the creeds of the Church (although we may well find that a helpful way of encapsulating some of what we believe about him). We're not going to try to provide a definitive answer to all the questions about him (although we may draw on some of the insights of those who've tried). We're going to try to see something of his infinite variety and overwhelming magnetism through the eyes of those who encountered him during his time on earth – the people he helped and healed and to whom he brought hope.

If you read a biography of someone or look at a feature on someone in a magazine or listen to a eulogy at a funeral, the speaker or writer – who will have experienced only one aspect of his or her subject – will draw on reminiscences and stories from others for a broader picture. That's what we're going to try and do with Jesus. We won't build up a complete picture or compile the definitive profile, but we may learn along the way things about him that can help us. After all, the people who met Jesus as he trod the dusty roads of first century Palestine, as he taught in the synagogues and on the hillsides, as he discussed and debated with the tradesmen and the intellectuals, the powerful and the powerless – they were people who faced many of the same issues and concerns about life that we do. We may find ourselves able to identify with some of these people and so glimpse through their eyes aspects of Jesus' life that will enable us to meet him too. At the heart of this kaleidoscope of experiences and encounters is the same Jesus, the same person, the same historical figure, but we'll begin, I hope, to see the many facets of his life that can touch ours – to encourage us, to challenge us, to help us, to shock us even.

So let's begin at the beginning. At least, we begin at the beginning of his earthly ministry as he meets his cousin, John – John the Baptist. In all four gospels the ministry of Jesus Christ is prefaced with something about John's ministry. There's an awful lot we could say about John the Baptist himself, but our subject is Jesus, so we'll just sketch in the background to John's life with a few brief details. A few months before Jesus was born, John was also born in fairly miraculous circumstances. His birth was

foretold by an angel. His parents were both well on in years and considered incapable of having any children. Strange signs accompanied the birth. And John was divinely appointed as a messenger who would prepare the way for his cousin. John's ministry took him to the edges of society because he lived in a very unorthodox manner – away from the towns, dressed very simply, feeding himself by foraging – and he preached an uncompromising message, a message of righteousness and holiness. Those who took seriously that message, which required public repentance as a way into holiness, signified their assent by being baptised by John in the Jordan River, hence his nickname "The Baptist".

And as we read on in the gospel stories, we find John tangling not only with the religious leaders of the day, but also rebuking the political leaders too about their own behaviour. John told King Herod straight that he was in the wrong because of his marriage to his brother's wife. He ended up in prison and was then executed at the whim of a dancing girl whom Herod was trying to impress. The words we've read this morning from *Matthew 3* give us a flavour of John's ministry style (vv7-10) and in the words that he speaks here we begin to see a little of what Jesus is about to do through his ministry. And the second part of the passage relates the story of Jesus' baptism by John – a baptism that could not have been for repentance, as Jesus had nothing of which he needed to repent. This was a baptism in which Jesus identified with the fallen, broken people he had come to help, a baptism in which he showed himself willing to demonstrate the humanity which he had taken on in order to make a difference in the world which was so in need of the love and grace of God.

As John encounters Jesus out there on the bank of the Jordan, we begin to see the foundation on which his ministry is to be built. We see the underlying reality of who he is, which will help us as we reflect on the other encounters that he had in the next few weeks. And this is a particularly appropriate episode to think about this morning on Trinity Sunday because we can see here how all three persons of the Holy Trinity are involved.

1. ACCLAIMED BY JOHN

The words which are spoken as Jesus is baptised, words which the people believe are from the mouth of God himself, identify Jesus as the Son. This Son is now clothed in human flesh, a human heart beating within his chest of skin and muscle and bone. And John, the very earthy human who has been sent to herald his coming, recognises that the time is now right to acclaim him, to announce who Jesus is and what he has come for.

He recognises in Jesus – and, no doubt, as someone who has been set apart for this task, is inspired by the Holy Spirit – that he is someone who is full of power. John actually says "*More powerful than I*". John is a man whose words and example are hugely powerful – he inspires many to repent and be baptised, he annoys the religious leaders and he attacks the King. He is, in many ways, the archetypal Hebrew prophet and many people do, indeed, describe him as the last of the Hebrew prophets. But Jesus is to be even more powerful and, as we continue to look at these encounters Jesus has with the people of first century Palestine, we'll see that he is a person with power over demons, over sickness, over the religious and political establishment, even over creation itself. John's power brings people to baptism in the Jordan: Jesus power brings upon them the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a fiery baptism. John's power brings people to repentance, but Jesus' power – the power of a holy and just judge – actually sorts out the wheat from the chaff, the righteous from the unrighteous, the repentant from the unrepentant. This man, this Son of the holy and righteous God, is so powerful that even John can only kneel before him.

And John acclaims him, too, as sinless, as having no need to repent. When Jesus asks John for baptism, John responds that there is no need. In fact, it should be John who asks Jesus for baptism. In the end, John consents as Jesus identifies himself with humanity, as he demonstrates in baptism that he is "one of us". This is the powerful, just and righteous, sinless Son of God, recognised and acclaimed by a fellow

human being as he sets out on the path of ministry, service and sacrifice which are the reasons for and the hallmarks of his coming into our world.

2. AFFIRMED BY THE FATHER

And as Jesus, the human Son of God, steps back onto the bank of the river, a voice is heard. It seems to come from heaven and is heard clearly enough to be reported. Jesus is beginning his earthly ministry, a human being just as we are, with the same feelings and fears and frustrations as we have – so we are told in the *Letter to the Hebrews* – so it's very probably that there he was experiencing a certain amount of apprehension in his own mind. And for the others who were standing around, there was, no doubt, a certain sense of curiosity about this man whom John has just acclaimed and to whom he has just tried to refuse baptism. So, for the benefit of those who are wondering and to encourage Jesus as he steps out on this extraordinarily vital path of sacrifice and salvation, God affirms him as his Son. A voice from heaven should leave no doubt in anyone's mind that Jesus is special – he is God's son.

But to encourage Jesus, God the Father adds another couple of comments to his celestial voiceover. He firstly affirms that he loves him. Jesus has come into our world knowing that he is loved by God. That is surely a thought that will comfort Jesus as he confronts the awful reality of his mission over the next three years, culminating in the horror of the cross and the pain and suffering that comes with it. He is loved by his Father.

Not only that, his Father is “*well pleased*” with him. The words of a proud parent are spoken from the sky as Jesus sets out to follow his destiny. There are echoes in these words of *Psalms 2:7* and *Isaiah 42:1*. For those who were familiar with the Psalms and the Prophets, these words from heaven would have been a kind of stamp of approval on the ministry of Jesus, a man who had come from the Father to change the world, to change the course of history, to blaze the trail to eternal life in a renewed and redeemed creation.

3. ANOINTED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT

And at the same time as Jesus is acclaimed by John and affirmed by the Father as the Son of God, the Holy Spirit descends from the sky and lands on Jesus. It's a visual symbol of what is going on, just as the anointing with oil was a visual symbol of the preparation of the priests and kings of the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit is entering Jesus and equipping him for his calling. As we've said many times before, *Christ* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *Messiah* and means, in English, “anointed”. Jesus is receiving, if you like, the seal of approval of his Father and with it the wherewithal to fulfil the ministry for which the world had been waiting since the earliest days of its existence.

Now, there are all kinds of theories about this symbol and its significance – questions about the divinity, the self-knowledge, the power and so on of Jesus – but whatever view you take, this is clearly a significant occasion. Jesus is now ready to get on with what he came to earth to do. He has been set apart by God and prepared for this moment – prepared for it from before the world began. Now no-one should be able to doubt that this man, who stands bedraggled yet triumphant on the bank of the Jordan, is the one who has been set apart by God to change the world. Here is the Son of God, acclaimed by his fellow humans, affirmed by his Heavenly Father and anointed by the Holy Spirit – and he is going to live and speak and work and die and be raised again so that this world, so that you and I, can be transformed and prepared for an eternity with God.

That is the basis on which we move into this series of encounters with Jesus. The Jesus whom we will meet through the eyes of those who are healed, helped, restored, challenged, rebuked, is the Son of God, a man of power and holiness, sent by his heavenly Father who loves and supports him in his mission, and empowered and inspired by the Holy Spirit whose life is now available to all of us. Even if you've never

heard of him until this morning, that's an intriguing prospect. As we look at him and read of his encounters with others, I pray that we too will encounter him, not only here in this place at this time, but wherever we find ourselves day by day. Because as followers of The Main Man ourselves, we can also count on God's love and the Holy Spirit's empowering in our own lives, enabling us, as Paul puts it, to *"reflect the Lord's glory [and be] transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit"* (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Questions for discussion on the next page.

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Questions for discussion

1. What, for you, is the most important thing about Jesus?
2. John's preaching is very direct. Is that still appropriate today? Why/why not?
3. What do you think John means when he says that Jesus will "*baptise you with ... fire*"?
4. Why was Jesus baptised? And why did John initially refuse?
5. The Holy Spirit comes upon Jesus at this point. Up until then, was Jesus full of the Holy Spirit? Did he possess the power of the Holy Spirit before this? Was he really divine before this?
6. Why did God speak from the heavens at this point?
7. What would you most like to find out about Jesus?