

17 September 2006

## **"A Compelling Voice in the Desert"**

Reading: John 1:19-34

There was a new excitement in the air. They hadn't seen anything like it for centuries. People were flocking in their droves from Jerusalem and all over Judea to the desert region on the other side of the Jordan River. (Mark 1:5) On centre stage was a man called John. He seems to have appeared out of nowhere. His clothes were made of camels' hair and he wore a leather belt around his waist. That, in itself, was significant; the renowned prophet, Elijah, had dressed in the same way. (II Kings 1:8; Mt. 3:4) His tone was authoritative. His voice was resonant. His message was uncompromising. And his summons was simple: "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near!"

John the Baptist is often portrayed in movies as a fanatic with wild eyes and unkempt hair. Nothing could be further from the truth. Rugged - yes, but fanatical and slightly unbalanced - no ways! He answered practical questions with balance and sanity. (Lk. 3:7-14) Zeal and intelligence are not mutually exclusive qualities. You only have to read Jesus' own assessment of the man to realize that John the Baptist was far-sighted as well as big-spirited. (Mt 11:7-15)

People traveled some distance to get to him. If you are familiar with the terrain, you will know that it was not a pleasant little day trip. But they came in their droves. That's because in his preaching they heard the voice of God. There was that ring of prophetic authority. You cannot explain it, but you know when it's there.

He was telling people that God's long-awaited kingdom was soon to dawn, calling upon them to repent and to demonstrate this by being baptized. And he was speaking, in exalted terms, about one who was soon to appear on the scene.

### **A Delegation from the Sanhedrin**

His forthright proclamation was causing such a stir that the leaders of the Jewish establishment sent a high-power delegation to interrogate him. It

consisted of Priests and Levites and there were some Pharisees in tow as well. They had been sent by the (leaders of the) Sanhedrin, which was largely controlled by the family of the High Priest. They arrived from Jerusalem with a battery of questions. Although their initial question is not recorded, we can deduce from John's answer that it was a pointed enquiry, "Are you the Christ?" (cf. Lk. 3:15). First century Palestine was rife with Messianic expectation. Some expected a Davidic Messiah. Others (like the Qumran community) expected a priestly Messiah as well. And John was unlike anyone they had seen or heard. He was announcing the imminent arrival of God's kingdom. So the question is not surprising.

John's answer is categorical. And it is more than a simple denial. Here is an opportunity to witness about the one who is to come after him. His answer reads literally, "And he confessed and did not deny and he confessed. **I** am not the Christ!" (The '**I**' is emphatic to strengthen the denial). The NIV translates the verse: "He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Christ.'" (1:20)

"Then who are you? Are you Elijah?" they asked. Malachi had predicted that Elijah would come before the day of the LORD (Mal. 4:5, 6). Because Elijah had ascended in a whirlwind, some took this prophecy to mean that the prophet himself would return. But John dissociated himself from such notions with a categorical denial: "I am not."<sup>1</sup>

Are you the Prophet? The prophet like Moses, who would speak the words of God, had long been regarded as a special end-time figure. (Deut. 18:15-18) The Samaritans even identified the prophet with the promised Messiah. But John is adamant: "No!"

"Then who (exactly) are you?" they asked. "Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?"

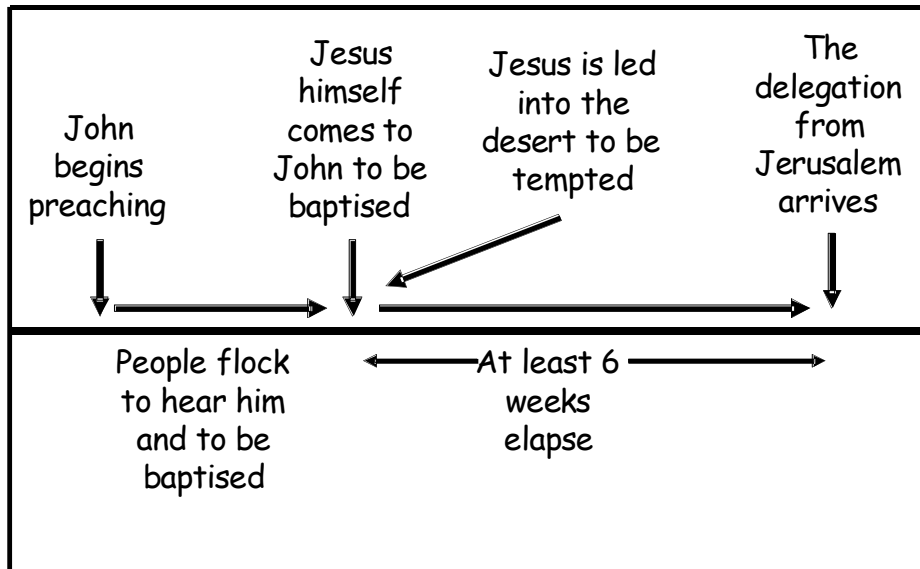
John answered in the words of the prophet Isaiah: "I am the voice of one crying in the desert, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" (Is. 40:3). In the original context, the prophet was calling for a (metaphorical) improvement in the road system of the desert to the east, a leveling of hills and valleys and a straightening of the curves to accommodate the return of the covenant

people from exile. But this is extended, even in Isaiah, to refer to a much greater day when God's kingdom will be ushered in.

Some Pharisees, who had accompanied the Priests and Levites, questioned him: "Why then do you baptize if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" The practice of immersion or ritual washing was not entirely unknown. In 'proselyte baptism' the 'converts' dipped *themselves*. Here *John* was doing the baptising. More importantly, John was baptising *Jews*. In doing so he was sending an important signal. And that prompted the question. No-one could deny that this man spoke with authority. But what did this practice mean? What was he trying to say?

### Four Key Statements

John made several important statements about Jesus. This morning we are going to concentrate on four of these. Before we examine these four key statements, it will help us to get the sequence of events straight in our minds.



We are not sure how long John had been preaching before Jesus came to him to be baptized. (Mt 3:13-17) Mark indicates that Jesus was led into the desert immediately after his baptism. (Mark 1:12; cf. Mt 4:1; Luke 4:1-2) John no doubt continued his ministry while Jesus was in the desert. At least 6 weeks elapsed (possibly two to three months). We do not know where Jesus was immediately prior to the events recorded in this chapter (after his baptism). The delegation from Jerusalem arrived, and that's where we take up the story. Now let's look at these statements, one at a time.

1. **"He is right here among you!"**

When the Pharisees who had come with priests and Levites asked pointedly who John was, he said, "*Among you stands one you do not know.*" (26) This must have occasioned gasps and caused the people to look around them. John had spoken about one who was to come after him. He had said that his coming was near, but he had given no indication as to exactly when he would appear. My guess is that they thought his coming was several months or even years away. Later he explained to his disciples, "I myself did not know him ... I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain, he it is who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.'" (1:31, 33, 34)

There is a little more to this statement than meets the eye. John had said, "I did not know him." It is very likely that John did know Jesus. They were relatives. It is highly unlikely that Mary would have had no contact with Elizabeth after their two sons were born. (Luke 1:39-56)<sup>2</sup> In fact, when Jesus came to him to be baptized, John tried to deter him. "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" It certainly seems that he knew Jesus and admired him. But, when God called him and made it clear that he was to be the Messiah's forerunner, he knew that it was not his prerogative to appoint the Messiah. No more than he could appoint himself to such a role could he speculate as to who the Messiah might be. He was aware of the sacred nature of his commission from God. God had told him, "The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit." (1:33) From the moment that John saw the Spirit come down

as a dove and remain on him at his baptism, he knew that Jesus was the one for whom he was preparing the way.

2. **"He is much greater than I am."**

Secondly, John said in unequivocal terms, "He is much greater than I am." When John announced that Jesus was standing among them, he added, "*He is the one who comes after me, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.*" (27) There was a well-known rabbinical saying regarding the responsibilities of disciples toward their teachers: "Every service a slave performs for his master shall a disciple do for his teacher except the loosing of his sandal thong". As part of our language study at school, we did 'degrees of comparison'. Remember, great, greater, greatest - positive, comparative and superlative degrees. It helps us to think of John's statement in terms of degrees of comparison.

John did not say, "You think I'm somebody because I baptize. Let me tell you that the one about whom I am speaking is so much greater than I that I regard myself as his disciple. I will therefore do absolutely everything for him except, of course, untie the thongs of his sandals." He did not say (using the comparative degree), "I am his disciple, but I regard him so highly that I will do what no normal disciple is expected to do: I'll *even* untie the thongs of his sandals." He said (using the superlative degree), "He is *so very much* greater than I am that I am not even worthy to do what no disciple is expected to do; I don't deserve to untie the thongs of his sandals."

Once Jesus and his disciples started baptizing, some of John's disciples expressed a concern. "Rabbi," they said to John, "the man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan - the one you testified about - well, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him." John quickly put their minds at rest. He spoke about a wedding. The best man or groomsman is there to attend the bridegroom. He waits and listens and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. If his attitude is right and he's doing his job properly, his nose is not out of joint because the bridegroom receives attention. John said, in effect, "I'm delighted. That joy is mine and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less." (3:22-30)

In the same vein, John made a really amazing assertion: "A man who comes after me has surpassed me, because he was before me." (1:30) John, as we know, was a little older than Jesus. But he claims that Jesus was before him. This, of course, ties in with the great statement right at the beginning of the Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word..." It is of the same order as Jesus' assertion, "Before Abraham was, I am."<sup>3</sup>

3. **"He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit."**

Thirdly, John said, "He will baptize you in the Holy Spirit." That's how Matthew, Mark and Luke put it. (Mt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16) In John, the same thought is expressed, but this time John is reporting what God had said to him: The one who sent me to baptize with water said, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain, is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.'" (1:33)

As we have seen, the very fact that John was baptizing, and baptizing Jews at that, gave rise to serious questions about his identity. When questioned, he took the opportunity to point to the One who would follow him. Again the 'I' is emphatic. '*I* baptize with water...' In effect, John was saying, "I only baptize you *with water*. You think I am somebody because I baptize with water. He will baptize with the *Holy Spirit!*"<sup>4</sup>

This statement is highly significant for several reasons. According to Old Testament prophecy, God's Spirit was to be poured out upon the Messiah (Is. 11:1ff; 61:1). God's Spirit would also rest on the Servant of the LORD described in the four Servant Songs commencing in Isaiah 42: 1). A copious outpouring of the Spirit was also associated with the coming age, the age of the kingdom (Ezek. 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-32)

Here John sums up the entire experiential work of the coming Messiah: "He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."<sup>5</sup> We will say more about this when we come to chapter 7. Right now let's just note that John was, in effect, saying: "I can speak of repentance and employ the important symbol of water baptism. But he will baptize you in the

Holy Spirit. Not only is he much greater than I am, but the spiritual blessing he will bestow will supersede by far anything that you receive through my ministry."

4. **"He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world"**

The fourth statement of John is the most amazing of all. The day after the delegation from Jerusalem had questioned John about his identity, he saw a man in the crowd coming toward him and said: "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (1:29) He added immediately, "This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel."

On the following day, John was there again with two of his disciples (Andrew and either Philip or John). He noticed Jesus passing by and said, "Look the Lamb of God!" (1:35-36) The disciples took this as a signal and began to follow Jesus. Jesus noticed that they were following him and asked what they wanted. They inquired as to where he was staying and he then beckoned them to come and see. He invited them in and they spent the rest of the day with him.<sup>6</sup>

Here we must ask, Why this designation? What prompted John to describe Jesus as the Lamb of God? With the wisdom of hindsight, we who live on this side of Calvary and have the New Testament at our disposal, may well call him the Lamb of God, but what prompted John do so?

No doubt John was saying more than he himself understood, but the statement is still remarkable when we consider that in his other statements concerning Jesus he portrays him as powerful and exalted. We must also remember that even after at least two years with him, Jesus' disciples could not understand that he must suffer. (Mark 8:31-33) Suffering seemed totally inconsistent with the notion of messiahship.

I have a theory on which I would not stake my life, but I think it's a reasonable one. John's first identification of Jesus as the Lamb of

God took place at least 6 weeks (probably 2 months or more) subsequent to Jesus' baptism. After Jesus' baptism, he went immediately into the desert to be tempted by the Devil.

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us that at Jesus' baptism a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son whom I love; with you I am well pleased.' (Mt 3:17; Mark 1:11; Lk. 3:22) We are not sure who heard that voice. We know that John saw the Spirit descend on him like a dove. In Matthew's account, the statement from heaven is in the third person: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." It would appear, from the whole tenor of the account, that in addition to Jesus, at least some who were present heard the statement. No one, besides Jesus himself, would be more likely to have heard it than John the Baptist. What strengthens this impression is John's statement when he refers to Jesus' baptism and the descent of the Spirit upon him: "I have seen and I testify that *this is the Son of God.*" (1:34).

God's declaration at Jesus' baptism may well be seen as a combination of two important passages, namely, Psalm 2:7, "*You are my Son; today I have become your Father.*" (cf. Acts 4:25-26; 13:32-34; Heb. 1:5; 5:5) and Isaiah 42:1, "*Here is my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen one in whom I delight.*"(cf. Mt. 12:15-21; Lk. 2:32). If this is so, it could explain John's thought process in the two month period between Jesus' baptism and John's identification of him as the Lamb of God. Psalm 2 is undoubtedly a messianic psalm, and Isaiah 42 is the first of four Servant Songs in the latter half of Isaiah.<sup>7</sup> These are quoted in the New Testament as referring to Jesus (e. g. Acts 8:30-35; 13:47; Rom. 10:16; 15:21; I Pet. 2:22-24). There is an interesting identification of *Eved Yahweh* (the Servant of the LORD mentioned in these songs) with the Messiah in the prayer of Acts 4 (23-30) where Psalm 2 is quoted but Jesus is referred to as God's Holy Servant.

This is an identification that the disciples could not make. (Mt.16:16-23; Lk 9:44-45) A suffering Messiah seemed to be a contradiction in terms. That is why the risen Lord had to "open their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Lk. 24:25-27, 44-47).

The best known of the Servant Songs is the fourth. It speaks of the Lord's Servant being highly exalted. (Is. 52:13; 53:12) But *en route* to that exaltation he must be despised and rejected and carry our iniquity:

We all, like sheep have gone astray,  
each one has turned to his own way;  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
he was led *like a lamb* to the slaughter,  
and as a sheep before her shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth  
(Is. 53:6-7)

Could it be that John the Baptist was able to see the significance in the fusing of a great messianic psalm with the opening statement of the series of poems that describes the substitutionary suffering of the Servant of the LORD? What lends credence to this link is the fact that verse 2 of Isaiah 42 reads as follows: "*I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations...*" The Anointed One (*Meshiach* - Ps. 2:2), the One upon whom the Spirit rested (Is. 42:2) was to be led as a Lamb to the slaughter (Is 53:7). John was indeed "more than a prophet" (Mt. 11:9).

Whether or not the heavenly pronouncement led John to the statement, the identification is highly significant. Way back in Genesis we see the principle of substitutionary sacrifice. Abraham is instructed to sacrifice his own son. It was undoubtedly a test and Abraham was so convinced that God would keep his promise that he believed Isaac would be raised from the dead if necessary. (Gen. 22:1-18; Heb. 11:17-19; Jas. 2:21-24) He was not just fobbing Isaac off when he responded to his puzzled son's enquiry, "The fire and the wood are here but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" Abraham's response was a statement of faith: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering." As we know, there was a

lamb caught in a thicket. Jehovah Jireh had provided the lamb for the offering.

Peter describes the great cost of our redemption in terms that are crystal clear: We were redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect ... chosen before the creation of the world but ... revealed in these last days for (our) sake (I Pet. 1:18-20).

But the picture is clearest in the Book of Revelation. In a vision John sees God seated on a throne in heaven. In his right hand was a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. A mighty angel proclaimed with a loud voice, "Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?" No-one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. John sensed the importance of the opening of the scroll representing the unfolding of the purposes of God. If the scroll remains sealed, the meaning of history is unclear and its outcome uncertain. In his heightened state of consciousness, he wept uncontrollably. One of the elders around the throne said to him, "Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals." (Rev. 5:1-5; cf. Gen. 49:10; II Sam. 7:8-16; Is. 9:6-7; 11:10).

But as John looked at the unfolding scene, he saw, not a lion but a lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the centre of the throne. As he took the scroll from the right hand of the One seated on the throne, the heavenly creatures around the throne fell down and worshipped. They sang a new song:

'You are worthy to take the scroll  
and to open its seals,  
because you were slain,  
and with your blood you purchased men for God  
from every tribe and language  
and people and nation.  
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests  
to serve our God,  
and they will reign on the earth'.

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang:

'Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,  
to receive power and wealth  
and wisdom and strength  
and honour and glory and praise!'

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing:

'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb  
be praise and honour and glory and power,  
for ever and ever!' (Rev 5:1-14)

It's an inspiring picture. God's great plan of redemption centers around one who is described as the Lamb of God. One cannot but think of the great hymn:

Crown him with many crowns,  
the Lamb upon his throne;  
Hark how the heavenly anthem drowns  
all music but its own:  
Awake my soul and sing  
of him who died for thee,  
and hail him as thy matchless King  
through all eternity.

### **Conclusion**

What a message John proclaimed. And we can learn from him. His role was unique and inimitable. But his attitude serves as a model for us all. He existed to point to Jesus. When Jesus was the focal point, he was overjoyed. As an individual, that should be your great mission in life. Nothing you do is more important than that. Through your unique gifts and with your particular opportunities, you can bring honour to him.

As a church this must continue to be our great passion. We are about to embark upon a strategic planning process (I wish I had a better name for it). Whatever we decide to do and however we seek to do it, this must be the great underlying passion: to present Jesus to our world in all his magnificence and to unashamedly promote his claims to a world that needs him now more than ever.

### Notes

1. Malachi had predicted that Elijah would come before the day of the LORD (Mal. 4:5, 6). Because Elijah had ascended in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1, 2, 11), some took this prophecy to mean that the prophet himself would return. But John dissociates himself from such notions with a categorical denial: "I am not." Later Jesus did identify John with 'Elijah', explaining that Malachi's prediction was fulfilled in John's ministry. (Mt 11:11-15) There is no contradiction here. John does not see himself as *the Elijah of popular expectation*; Jesus explains that John fulfilled the prophecy of Malachi by coming *in the spirit of Elijah*.
2. We should not take this summary statement in Luke 1:80 to mean that John was a recluse or that he spent time in the Qumran Community on the shores of the Dead Sea, as some have conjectured.
3. This reference is to the statement reported in the prologue. (1:15) The expression means literally, "Because he was first with respect to me." It includes both Jesus' absolute primacy and his temporal priority (the NEB translates it, "before I was born, he already was").
4. In Mark's record, both the 'I' and the 'he' are emphatic: "**I** baptize you with water, but **he** will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." (1:8)
5. Unnecessary (and unhelpful) controversy surrounds the term "the baptism in the Spirit". This is largely because proponents of the different views tend to lose sight of the *analogical* nature of the term. They have made it into a *definitive* term - sometimes *the* definitive term. Some see it as the initiatory work of the Holy Spirit and even identify it with regeneration (being born again). Others, reserve the term for a distinct experience of empowerment subsequent to conversion. In both approaches the focus seems to be on a single experience or work. This actually confuses the issue. The term is used in the Gospels to distinguish between what John was doing and what Jesus would do (*that* is why the term baptism is used). In the Book of Acts, we usually read about people receiving (the gift of) the Spirit or being filled with the Spirit. (Acts 2:4; 37-39; 4:31; 8:14-17; 9:17; 10:44-48; 13:52; 19:6) "Being baptized in the Spirit" is only mentioned twice in Book of Acts (in those

terms) and on both occasions there is reference to the contrast between the work of John and that of Jesus. (Acts 1:5; 11:15-17) In the epistles, the emphasis is on the fact that God gave us his Spirit. With the possible exception of 1 Corinthians 12:13, there is no reference to "being baptized in the Spirit" (See Gal 3: 2, 14; Eph 1:13, 14). It may also be significant that when reference is made to Jesus baptizing us in the Spirit, a verb rather than a noun is used. (Mt 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16) In fact, we never read of "the baptism in the Spirit". Perhaps we were not meant to identify any particular experience (be it regeneration or a subsequent experience of being filled) as the baptism in the Spirit!

It is more helpful to see the baptism in the Spirit as a description of everything that Jesus does in giving his Spirit to those who believe in him than to restrict it to a particular experience. That frees all who know the Lord to rejoice in the gift of the Holy Spirit and it enables us to move increasingly into an experience of his fullness.

6. Depending on how we understand John's reckoning of time, it was either 10 in the morning or 4 in the afternoon ("the 10<sup>th</sup> hour"). I think that it was probably about 4 in the afternoon and they spent the remainder of the day with him.
7. The four Servant Songs (Is. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) are embedded among the prophecies of the latter half of Isaiah. They point to one who is described as the Servant of the Lord (*Eved Yahweh*). H Wheeler Robinson gives us a wonderful introduction to these songs. He asks us to imagine that we are in the picture gallery of a great house. Among the portraits of distinguished ancestors, we notice that there is one that has no label. It stands out from all the others by its inherent quality and grandeur. But the identity of the subject is not revealed. Who is this enigmatic figure? Is this a self-portrait of the prophet? Or is it a portrayal of some historical figure of the prophet's own time, or perhaps of a past age? Is it an individualized portrait of a group? If so, is it Israel, or some remnant within Israel? He concludes that although there is a sense in which the songs refer to Israel, which was called to be a light to the nations, the prophecies point to the one who would fulfil this role *par excellence*. The portrait is so special and so elaborate in its details that it cannot simply refer to the nation or to a group within the nation. The features are distinctive. There must have been an individual sitter. The New Testament writers proclaimed that these songs found their ultimate fulfilment in Jesus. H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Cross in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1955), 65-80.

