

JESUS REVEALED BY JOHN

(Psalm 29 and Mark 4.1-11)

We will be concentrating on the Mark passage this morning so you might want to have your bibles open at page 1002.

John wore clothing made of camel's hair with a leather belt round his waist.

That's what Mark tells us about John the Baptist's chosen garb. What he does not tell us is that his mode of dress triggered a movement called 'Repentance chic' *Camel hair is the new fabric* said Jeff Banksofthejordan. *It's so versatile: not to mention brown: and scented.* High street retailers, Primarksgospel, are selling special camel-hair jeans, while top fashion house Versace of Jerusalem have brought out coats, tunics and even underpants. *The underpants are a very challenging statement,* said their PR agency. *They really focus the mind on this repentance issue. For a start you're sorry you ever put them on.*

And he ate locusts and wild honey. Just look at what this led to. Here is the specials board of a classy restaurant in Bethany high street.

LE MANOIR AUX JARDINS DES PHARISES

Today's Specials

A confit of honey & truffles 15 Shekels

Stuffed locusts on a bed of river weed 23 Shekels

A bit of fun: but it does emphasise how striking and different John was - and it was not only in dress and food. He lived in the desert which most people shunned but where he perhaps shared with the writer of Psalm 29 (which we have heard read (earlier) God's authority over nature. His preaching was what today we might call Hellfire. Mark is typically terse. He simply says in verse 4 *...preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.* But Matthew and Luke have him calling his hearers a brood of vipers, warning them to flee from the wrath to come, threatening that trees not bearing good fruit would be chopped down and burned.

The picture is of a very strange, wild, almost savage man sounding like the late Ian Paisley in his prime. One commentator said this about him:

He lived in those terrible deserts that lay all around the Dead Sea. Up and down he wandered, and fasted, and prayed, where Sodom and Gomorrah had once stood till the Lord rained fire and brimstone upon all the inhabitants of those cities, and upon all that grew upon the ground. A terrible man. A man not to come near.

Yet people did come near; people did heed what he said; people did offer to be baptised by him. Why?

1. He spoke with authority because he lived his message. His very life was protest against conventional standards.
2. His message was simple and straightforward – turn away from your previous unclean life.
3. He offered baptism in water – a symbol by the washing process, of the decision to do just that.
4. He promised something better – someone better, someone...perfect.
5. And.... the time was right for his message, the time predicted. Mark quotes the prophets Malachi and Isaiah, although he refers only to Isaiah:
6. *I will send my messenger ahead of you who will prepare your way – a voice of one crying in the desert 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight paths for him'.*

Picture the scene - the wild, unkempt John, knee deep in the River Jordan, a queue of people on the bank. One by one they take off their outer garments. One by one they step forward into the water. One by one he immerses them. Does he say anything? We don't know but we see each of them regain the river bank soaking wet. He looks up at the next in the queue and waves them on. There is a rhythm to the process. Then, he looks up and his wave is suspended in mid-air. There, in front of him, is Jesus! There, in front of him, is the man of whom he has been proclaiming that he was more powerful than he and whose sandals he was not worthy to bend down to untie. Matthew tells us that John said to Jesus: *You should be baptising me not me baptising you.* But Jesus insisted and was baptised by John.

Like all the rest Jesus makes for the river bank. As he does so, something extraordinary happens. Mark describes it as heaven being torn open. I do not think for a moment that there was a sound of ripping fabric and a gap appeared in a sort of heavenly sheet. But it is clear that there was suddenly a

very different, a very special atmosphere. And then the spiritual met with the material. Mark's description is of something like dove coming down on Jesus. Perhaps it was a special sort of light on each side of Jesus like the wings of a dove betokening gentleness. Then the words: *You are my Son, whom I love: with you I am well pleased.* Tom Wright's translation is *You are my wonderful son; you make me very glad.* Either way the meaning is clear. God is announcing that Jesus is his delightful, much loved Son.

We have had a close look at John. We have witnessed his baptism of Jesus. It's time to take a closer look at Jesus himself in the particular context of this passage. If you were at the midnight service on Christmas Eve, you would have heard St. John's introduction to Jesus. But that was an introduction to Jesus almost as a concept – Jesus the Word; Jesus the light of the world. Mark is introducing us to Jesus, the man.

What does he tell us about Jesus?

1. That he is powerful. *One, says John in v.7, who is more powerful than I.* If we look forward to what Jesus said and did during his three years' ministry, we can see that. We can see that power in his preaching, in his arguments with the Jewish religious leaders, in his healing, in his making the dead live again, in his miracles, in his driving out demons. Yet this was not a strong-arm power either literally or metaphorically – with possible exception of when he drove the merchants out of the temple. It was the power of his holy personality driven sometimes by compassion, sometimes by the compulsion to right wrong actions or wrong thinking.

2. *He is more worthy than I am,* says John in the same verse. So much more so that John vividly compares himself in relation to Jesus as worse than a servant or a slave, one of whose jobs is to take off his master's sandals. How worthy is Jesus? The writer of the book of Revelation tells us in chapter 5 - *The lamb who was slain is worthy to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honour and glory and praise.* Jesus is that worthy!

3. That he will baptise with the Holy Spirit. Bishop Tom Wright's trenchant translation is *He's going to plunge you in the Holy Spirit.* Another commentator speaks of being drenched. Yet another way is about being wettened by the Holy Spirit, as in our modern baptism service. The picture,

however expressed, is one of being taken over by the Holy Spirit by the grace of God through Jesus.

Matthew and Luke tell us that John cavilled at the thought of baptising Jesus and we can well understand that in the light of his description of Jesus being far more powerful and far more worthy than he, John. Mark, in his typically terse way, merely says that Jesus was baptised by John. Why do you think Jesus, the sinless Son of God himself, was willing to be baptised? Let me suggest a few reasons:

1. It was a turning point in his life – John’s ministry convinced Jesus that, after 30 years working at home, now was the time to start his great ministry. Shakespeare’s Brutus muses; *There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune; omitted, all the voyage of their lives is bound in shadows and in miseries.* Baptism marked for Jesus that high point of flood in **his** life. His baptism marked that momentous decision.

2. It was an opportunity for him to identify himself with the movement back to God which John had produced by his ministry of calling people to repentance. Jesus had no need to repent but he wanted to identify himself with that movement. As one commentator put it – *The really great identification is when a man identifies himself with a movement, not for his own sake, but for the sake of others.*

3. It was the occasion of the approval of God demonstrated by the dove episode. Mark makes it clear that God spoke, not to the crowd, not even to John, but to Jesus himself – **You, You are my Son whom I love. With you I am well pleased.** But why a dove? Perhaps because a dove is a symbol of gentleness. We have seen how Jesus’ power was not physical. He was not meek and mild but he was gentle. John himself does not make the comparison but there is an obvious contrast between the rough, oddly-dressed, loud-mouthed effective John and the still more effective Jesus, ordinary-looking, story-telling, suffering.

I wonder if John was surprised by the remarkable business of the spirit coming down like a dove and those words *You are my Son, whom I love: with you I am well pleased.* My guess is that he was only a little surprised, if at all. After all, there in front of him, was the very man he had been talking about –

the man the prophets had been telling the Jewish nation about over many, many years; powerful, infinitely worthy, the channel of the grace and power of the Holy Spirit. And now he hears those wonderful words confirming not only Jesus' other attributes but his uniqueness – *You are my Son*.

He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit said John. Baptise, plunge into, be drenched in, made wet by, are words I have used to describe Jesus working through the Holy Spirit. All those words use the analogy of water being poured out. But we have a problem with that, don't we. We don't like getting wet unless we are ready for it, like when we take a shower. We have a further problem: we can't control the Holy Spirit like we can our shower – on/off, hot/cold. So we put up a big umbrella so that we do not get wet and uncomfortable. There's still time for a New Year resolution. Let's furl the umbrella. Let's allow Jesus' spirit to penetrate us, so that we can know what he wants of us and do it, however scary that may be.

You are my Son. Jesus is unique and always there for us by his Spirit.

A man fell into a quicksand and started to sink. While he was sinking, Confucius walked by and said: *There is evidence that men should stay out of such places*. But the man was still sinking in the quicksand. Then Buddha walked by and said: *Let that man be a lesson to the world*. But the man was still sinking in the quicksand. Then Mohammed came by and said: *Alas, it is the will of Allah*. But still the man continued to sink. Next, a Hindu came past and said: *Never mind, you will return to earth in another form*. But the man was sinking deeper and deeper into the quicksand. Finally Jesus walked by, reached out his hand and said *Grab hold of my hand and I will pull you out*.

You are my Son, says God. Jesus is unique and he is always there for us by his spirit if we keep the umbrella down and tightly furled