

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

[based on Mark 1:4-11]

Malachi prophesied the birth of John, who became known as the baptizer, calling him the messenger who would clear the way for another messenger.

John the Baptist's birth was orchestrated by God, used by Him to re-ignite the longing in the hearts of the people, who were still awaiting the coming of a messiah, to free them from the yoke of the Roman masters.

The name John means 'God is gracious.' God himself gave John that name before he was born and it was revealed to his father, Zechariah in a dream. (Luke 1:13)

His birth signaled the beginning of a new relationship between God and humanity, an era that would be characterised by grace instead of law.

John and Jesus were relatives.

We all remember that Mary, when she was pregnant with Jesus, visited her cousin Elizabeth, who, at 88 years old was also pregnant - with John. When Mary entered the room, Elizabeth (who was further along in her pregnancy) felt the baby jump inside her womb. Many scholars believe this to be a clear indication that something amazing was destined to happen.

There is evidence that the two families visited one another during the time the boys were growing up. The cousins lived only 4 miles apart, with John's family coming from the city of Judah, a small village west of Jerusalem.

The most eventful occurrence in John's early childhood, would likely have been a visit to Jesus' family in Nazareth, in the month of June, when John was six years old. Following this particular visit, John's parents decided it was time to systematically educate him for his future role.

However, tragedy soon struck. John's father was murdered, so Elizabeth and John fled into the desert and there he remained until his baptism, when he made his public ministry known to everyone.

So, John and Jesus, even though they were cousins, would not have grown up together.

Because John's mother, Elizabeth, was very old when she gave birth to him, it would follow that John would lose his parents while he was still young. When he was 28 and Elizabeth was 116, John's mother passed away unexpectedly. Elizabeth's friends, knowing the Nazarite rules regarding contact with the dead, even for the family, made all the arrangements before sending for John.

John knew that God had given him a purpose from early in his life. Isaiah had prophesied that he was to be a 'forerunner', or 'envoy', of the Messiah.

Throughout history, when a King or Queen wanted to visit another realm, he/she would send an *envoy* to proclaim that their King/Queen would be coming. It is clear that God sent John to be the envoy for Christ.

Now Christ wanted to heal the poor of their sins. So, John, *the envoy*, preached the coming of the Messiah to the poor and lowly, and anyone else who cared to listen, telling them to repent of their sins and be baptized.

John didn't mind the rough territory he was sent to. He was strong and could take care of himself. He even made his own clothes and footwear. He must have been a 'sight to see' with his camel hide clothing and leather belt. His diet was honey and locusts (kosher food according to the Jewish dietary rules). John's rough appearance would help him fit in with the poorer members of the communities he visited.

Wherever he went, he would tell the people of the coming Messiah, who would change everything.

John was doing a great job. He had disciples of his own, yet he always made it abundantly clear that *he* was not the Messiah...that another would come, someone whose very shoes John felt unworthy to lace up.

One day Jesus had heard that John and his disciples, were preaching quite close to where Jesus' entourage was travelling, so he decided to drop by.

The two cousins were delighted to see each other. Then, Jesus asked John to do something that John absolutely did not want to do - Jesus wanted to have John baptize him!

John said, "I am not worthy to baptize you, please baptize me. You are the chosen one, not me." Jesus insisted, and he told John that being baptized by John, would show to the masses that He had come to bring his ministry of love to all the world.

So, John took Jesus into the Jordan and baptized him. It is here that Mark's gospel deviates from the version told by Matthew. Mark says that when Jesus came up out of the water, John saw the heavens open, and the Holy Spirit, like a dove, enter Jesus.

Then a voice emanating from heaven said, "**You** are my beloved son; in **You** I am well pleased!" Mark seems to be suggesting that the message was personal and for Jesus' ears alone, whereas the other gospels use a third person pronoun, indicating that the voice was heard by all.

This event kickstarted Jesus' ministry.

Not surprisingly, more than 3,000 people who were at Jesus' baptism, crowded in to be baptized by John too.

The 'coronation' through baptism certainly had more witnesses than the king's birth venue.

At that time, the Magi brought three gifts to recognise His birth - gold as a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense as a symbol of deity, and myrrh was an embalming oil, for the time when his life on earth would cease.

The book of Exodus tells us that the Tabernacle, where God is near to His children, was a place of much gold, frankincense and myrrh...extravagant expressions of the covenant love between God and the nation of Israel.

Jesus' birth signified a new 'tabernacle', where God now could be seen.

The baptism of Jesus is where the concept of 'God in Three Persons' really begins.

This was a "kingdom moment" – the ministry of God the Son beginning with the loving affirmation of God the Father, and the empowering presence of God the Spirit.

Holy, holy, holy, Blessed Trinity! AMEN