

## The Baptism of Jesus

I told my father, I told him, 'I am not going to stand by any longer and let them push me around. I am not going to stand and watch that fat bastard of a tax collector ride in on his large, fat horse with his clerks and their bits of paper, and take a large part of what we produce, to send to Rome, to keep the Senators and their hangers on in bread, wine and olives. Then he takes a look around our garden and picks the best of our fruit and vegetables to keep himself and



his fat wife in a big house in Jerusalem, while we are almost starving because we have to either eat all our grain to keep us from starving or go without and keep some to plant next year. We keep some to plant, so we run out before the next harvest comes in, and we run out of everything else because we have not had enough to preserve and store. And I am the one who works in the heat of the mid day sun, toiling to drag crops from the soil.'

'We' he says

'Alright, we are the ones who toil in the heat of the mid day sun, and he lives off the fat of the land just because he is a servant of Rome. I won't stand for it any longer!'

'And what are you going to do about it? One young man on his own.'

I was on a roll 'Then there is Herod, who is supposed to be our King. He should be looking out for us. He is supposed to be a Jew, but he is only an Idumean a descendent of Esau, who just happened to convert to Judaism. He thinks more of Rome than the Romans do. He taxes us as well and uses the money to build cities like those in Italy, and palaces for himself and fortresses for his soldiers. What does he do for me, in my country, in my land?

'Our country and our land!'

'Alright our country. What I am going to do about it is go and learn more about this man John the Baptiser who is living out in the desert and preaching the coming of God's Messiah. I want to be there when the Messiah comes. I want to be with him when he fights the Romans. I want to be there when we win our land back, so we can live in peace and prosperity, not under the heel of Rome.'

At this point I wound down, having run out of breath, and my father just looked at me with a look of horror on his face.

'You can't go and do that!'

'Why not?'

‘The Romans will only take so much rebellious talk from us. Every time someone starts a rebellion they send in an army, people are killed, not just those who fight, but their families, friends, neighbours, villages, anyone they can punish to stop it happening again. Do you want to condemn us all with your actions?’

‘If John the Baptist is right, and the Messiah is coming, we won’t loose.’

‘And better men than you have said that before, and lost their lives over it. Do you really want to loose your life over an itinerant messianic preacher?’

‘Well, anything has to be better than this! Anyway how do you know he is wrong. You have never heard him preach.’

‘No, but I have heard others preach. They are all the same, they rouse up the young men, they lead them in to danger, they die, and nothing changes. Is that what you really, really want to do with your life?’

‘Yes it is’ I said ‘ I have to do something.’ So I packed my spare robe in a square of cloth, mother gave me some bread and olives and some dried fruit for the road, and I set out to find John the Baptist.

So that is how I came to be squatting on the banks of the river Jordan, watching John baptise a large group of men and women who had come out from the nearby village where John had been preaching. I remember that it was a hot day with a clear blue sky. The sun was becoming hotter as the day lengthened, and dipping in and out of the cold water was a good place to be, to keep cool. Myself and a friend had our tunics pulled up and tucked in, and our heads covered, so that we could haul the wet baptised back up out of the river and safely on to the bank.

Suddenly John stopped talking to the woman he was about to dip into the water, and turned round to face the opposite bank and out into the desert and the hills beyond. We all turned to look as well. At first we could see nothing, then gradually we could see a cloud of dust that seemed to be moving towards us. It slowly revealed itself to be the figure of a man walking towards us with a brisk step, raising light brown dust with every move he made. John shielded his eyes against the sun and took a good look, then his face cleared and a smile, such as I have never seen, broke on his face. He left the bewildered woman in the middle of the river, from where she had to be rescued by the man waiting patiently in the water nearby to also be baptised. I looked away from John to help the two of them up out of the water.

By the time I looked up again, John must have waded across the river to the far bank because he was hauling himself up out onto the bank, getting rapidly to his feet, and running towards the figure walking towards us. When they met they hugged tightly, then had a rapid conversation. John soon gestured to some nearby stones, and the two of them sat down and began what turned out to be a long conversation, under the fascinated gaze of all of the people on the my side of the riverbank, both those waiting to be baptised, and those followers like me who had chosen to remain with John and listen and learn from him as we waited for the coming Messiah. Then much to our surprise, as we watched, John slid off his stone and knelt before the man making deep abeyance before him. We had never seen John bow to any man before.

That was one of the things which attracted me to him and to his teaching. He was even preaching against Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee and Perea in the matter of his divorce from his wife Phasaelis, because we all knew that he really wanted to marry Herodias who was his brother Philip's wife. Preaching against a powerful man like that was dangerous in the extreme. But here he was, kneeling like a subject before a king, and none of us had a clue who this man was.

As we watched the seated man rose and pulled John to his feet. He embraced him, and gestured him to lead on. John walked slowly back to the water, as if he were about to engage in a heavy and difficult task. At the edge of the river John watched as the man removed his mantle and hitched up his tunic and then jumped down into the water. He gave his hand to John who followed him down. They waded into the centre of the river to the deepest spot, there the man nodded again to John, who grabbed the back of his tunic, laid him back in the water until he was horizontal, with the water trying to gently float him down stream, then firmly pushed him under.

I remember the words John spoke to me when I came up out of the water at my baptism. 'I baptise you in the name of Yahweh. Through this act of drowning and being brought back to life, all your sins have been washed away. Hold your anger, hold the enthusiasms of your youth and watch and wait with me, for the Messiah, the chosen one of Yahweh, who is coming imminently.' I wondered what he would say to this man, who he obviously knew so well.

But he never said a word to him. As the man came up out of the water it seemed as if the sky rent open above us, and a bird like a dove came out of the tear, fluttered down and landed on the head of the man. Then a voice came echoing through the tear in the heavens

'This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'.

We all stood there open mouthed, John, the crowd on the bank and the man himself. Then the man seemed to come to himself again, turned round, clasped John's shoulder and gave him a little shake, then he set off wading to the point on the bank where he had jumped in. He got back out, shook out his tunic, retrieved his mantle which he slung over his arm, and set off walking back towards the desert.

The crowd which had been still and silent while all this was going on suddenly seemed to find a voice, and everyone turned to their neighbours, and in twos and threes began to speculate about what had just happened. Those of us who had been sitting at the feet of John for a while, gathered in huddles, and with one voice began to ask whether we had just seen the Messiah? The only thing that made us unsure was that John was still standing in the river watching the man walk away. Surely if he was the Messiah, he would have brought him and introduced him to us so that we could begin our work together. As the man disappeared into the dust again, John seemed to come to himself, and began to wade back to us. I helped haul him back onto the bank. People swarmed around him and he was peppered with questions. He held up his

hand. That is my cousin Jesus bar Joseph from Nazareth. You have seen and bear witness, he is Yahweh's chosen one and I am not worthy to undo his shoe laces. He has gone back into the desert to prepare himself for the work ahead. He will come and find those he needs to help him fulfil his mission when he is ready.

He then turned around, and returned to the bank, sat down and just watched the far bank as if it were revealing messages from Yahweh to him. And we waited also.