

Reading: Matthew Chapter 3

There was a man named Zacharias, he was a priest who took the services in the Temple at Jerusalem. One day Zacharias was visited by an angel with the amazing message that his wife Elizabeth should have a son, although they were both quite old. Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, perhaps they were cousins. Zacharias didn't believe that this wife could have a child, he only believed it was true when the baby was born. An angel had told Zacharias to call the baby's name "John" and that he was going to be a special child with a special work to do for God when he grew up.

So while Jesus was learning the trade of a carpenter in Nazareth, John was leading a very different life with his father and mother in Jerusalem. As his father was a priest John would learn a lot about God from the Old Testament while he was young. When John was old enough he left home and went to live in the wilderness of Judea, probably living in a cave, wearing a rough garment made of camel hair, with a leather girdle round his waist, and he fed very simply on locusts and wild honey.

While John was still a young man, he began to preach to the people on the banks of the River Jordan, possibly at a place where there was a ford across the river where many people would be going to and fro. He told the people that he was preparing the way for someone greater than he, the fastening of whose sandal he said he was not worthy to undo. He told the people how they should mend their ways, those who had more than one coat to share with someone who had none, the tax-gatherers to take from the people only what was just and due; he told the soldiers not to kill and to be content with their wages.

Those people who listened to John and were anxious to mend their ways and try to better lives, John "baptised" that is, completely dipped in the water of the river, and this showed that they had definitely made up their minds to try to live better lives.

Jesus had left his carpenter's shop at Nazareth to start a different kind of life altogether, preaching and teaching the people, and healing their sick ones, but before he started on this work, he too came to John and asked to be baptised.

John was very unwilling to do this, because he realised that Jesus, the son of God, was a perfect man who had never done any wrong and who didn't need to confess his faults and go down into the water in order that he could start a new life. But Jesus insisted, and as he came up from the water a shape like a dove, which was the "Spirit of God", was seen coming down from heaven and resting upon Jesus, and God spoke from heaven saying, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased".

Jesus was baptised to set us an example, and when we are grown up, we all have to do the same, to promise to try to live better lives and go down into the water, so that when we come up again we may start a new life.