

## Feast of the Lord's Baptism

John, the child born to the childless couple Zechariah and Elizabeth in their old age, grew up in the hill country of Judaea. Clothed in *“a garment of camel’s hair with a leather belt”* to evoke the memory of Elijah the prophet<sup>1</sup> and *“eating locust and wild honey”* he must have embarked on his life as a preacher and ascetic while still quite young because by the age of thirty he is widely known and he has a strong following, he has also antagonised the local King Herod, and the Roman authorities have soldiers keeping an eye on him. Significantly, he has gained a designation, a nickname, and is known universally not as ‘John the Preacher’ or ‘John the Ascetic’, or as ‘John the Scourge of the Powerful’ but by an activity that has come to define him, an activity others are not doing, something unique to him. He is known as ‘John the Baptist’.

While the Jews had all sorts of laws governing ritual purity and cleansing, baptism was not a common practice. Ritual washings and cleansing were something people did to themselves whereas baptism was something done to them by another. They came and stood before John who placed his hands upon them and immersed them in the waters of the River Jordan. They did not do it for themselves, but John did it to them. It became associated with repentance and denouncing one’s sins in order to rise out of the cleansing water to a new life. It was because John uniquely did this that he became known universally as ‘the Baptist’. John also spoke to the people about *“someone [who] is coming, someone who is more powerful than I am, and I am not fit to undo the strap of his sandals; he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire”* and John made it clear that when he comes he would give way to him when he said *“this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease.”*<sup>2</sup>. That someone was Jesus who during this time of John’s ministry continues to live life quietly as a carpenter in his hometown of Nazareth in Galilee.

The events of today’s gospel and feast mark the time chosen in God’s providence for this *“coming”* to happen. All three persons of the Holy Trinity are present: the Son receives baptism at John’s hands, the Spirit *“descends on him in bodily shape, like a dove”* and the Father speaks from heaven *“You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you.”* The events of this day create a few theological conundrums: if Jesus was without sin, why did he submit to a baptism for the repentance of sins; if Jesus was truly God why did the Holy Spirit come on him anew? We do not know the answers, but today’s events mark a moment when the baton is handed on, when the forerunner gives way to the one *“who is coming”*.

Today’s gospel started with the words, *“A feeling of expectancy had gown among the people, who were beginning to think that John might be the Christ....”*. Today the one who really is the Christ comes forward and begins his ministry.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 1:6 & 2 Kgs 1:8

<sup>2</sup> Jn 3:29-30