

**Jim's Notes for
The Gospel According to St. Matthew,
Chapter 3:1-17**

1: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea. . ."

This would have been about the year AD 28. The Gospel of St. Luke is more specific by stating, "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee . . . the word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness" (Luke 3:1-2).

Tiberius became the Roman emperor, after the death of Augustus on August 19, AD 14. The 15th year of Tiberius' reign would have begun in AD 28.

2: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The Greek for "repent" is *μετανοειτε* [metanoete]. It literally means "to think differently after". John the Baptist wasn't just calling for people to feel guilty or feel bad about their sins. They were being called to think differently, to have a change of mind and heart.

3: For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, "A voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

Hebrew: "A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isaiah 40:3).

Septuagint (Greek): "A voice of one crying in the wilderness, Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight the paths of our God" (Isaiah 40:3).

4: Now John wore a garment of camel's hair, and a leather girdle around his waist; and his food was locusts and wild honey.

John's clothing advertises his role as a prophet. John's outer garment is woven of camel-hair. "Also it will come about in that day that the prophets will each be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies, and they will not put on a hairy robe . . ." (Zachariah 13:4a). "He wears a leather loincloth of skin. They answered him, 'He was a hairy man with a leather girdle bound about his loins.' And he said, 'It is Elijah the Tishbite'" (II Kings 1:8).

His food is 'of the simplest: the easily caught locust (a winged insect some two inches long, eaten still by Bedouin). It may not sound appetizing to us westerners, but locusts were allowed to be eaten by the Law of Moses: "Of them you may eat: the locust according to its kind, the bald locust according to its kind, the cricket according to its kind, and the grasshopper according to its kind" (Leviticus 11:22). Wild honey would not be so bad except in the obtaining of it.

5: Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan, 6: and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

John's baptism was not the Jewish ceremonial bath removing ritual defilement, a rite too narrow for John's horizon; nor had it the efficacy of Christ's sacramental baptism. Like John, who was a transitional figure between the two major covenants of God, his baptism also held transitional rite. By accepting it the Jews acknowledged, in formal ritual fashion, their conviction that the kingdom was at hand and their willingness to admit and (implicitly) to remedy past guilt. Thus they became subjects of the era of preparation announced by John and this act of willing submission would earn God's grace. John's baptism was not sacramental baptism which brings with it the full forgiveness of sin, rebirth and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. We can see in the book of Acts that even if one had received John's baptism Christian baptism would later also be needed (see Acts 18:24 – 19:7).

7: But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?"

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the two leading sects of Judaism in the first century. John saw them coming to the Jordan River more as spies of the Temple authorities than as repentant sinners. They have clearly come with subtle and venomous intent "vipers", "They make their tongue sharp as a serpent's, and under their lips is the poison of vipers" (Psalm 140:3).

8: Bear fruit that befits repentance, 9: and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10: Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

Simply saying we repent of our sins without the fruitful outer manifestation of that repentance witnessed by God and people is not true repentance (*μετανοια* [metanoia] "thinking differently"). God calls for a complete change and turning of the inner man, the heart, which can only be brought about in his grace by the fiery power of the Holy Spirit. John's baptism is then the beginning of end of the old Covenant and the introduction of the new and eternal Covenant of the Messiah. The axe of Messianic judgment already threatens the fruitless trees but there is still a short time for repentance. The root of the tree of the old Covenant has been struck. For a time the tree will continue to stand, but it is doomed to fall.

11: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. 12: His winnowing fork is in his hand,

and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

The sacrament of Baptism of Jesus in the messianic age (in the Church), will not merely be an outward sign signifying repentance and conversion. That was John's baptism. It "will be with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Christian baptism by the grace and power of God brings about that which it signifies. John thus foretells the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, Acts 2:3, of which the sacrament of Baptism is one means. This purifying action on the individual soul produces a distinction between those who accept and those who refuse it. Hence the Messianic action is like a winnowing-fan (or fork): the grain is thrown into the air and the wind carries off the light chaff. The perspective is final: those not purified by the fire of the Spirit will be consumed by the fire of God.

13: Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. 14: John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15: But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

Jesus came to the Jordan from Nazareth to associate himself by baptism with all who thus expressed their readiness for the Messianic era. John was a relative of Jesus (see Luke 1:36). It is likely that John knew Jesus personally. It is obvious that John was aware of Jesus' greater authority and holiness, **"I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"** John is very uncomfortable with the reversal of roles. Jesus reassures John that, **"Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."** "Righteousness" (*δικαιοσύνη* [dikaiousune], i.e. observance of the due order established by God). Why did Jesus, who was without sin, submit to a baptism of repentance? It was to **fulfill** "observance of the due order established by God." This is the same word as that used in Matthew 2:15, 2:17, 2:23 and will be seen later in 5:17. Jesus came to fulfill the old Covenant. In his Person he was all to whom the Law and the Prophet had looked forward. The baptism of John was the bridge from the old to the new covenant and it was only fitting that Jesus be baptized by John.

16: And when Jesus was baptized, he went up immediately from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; 17: and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

If John had had any second thoughts about whether he should baptize Jesus, they were immediately put to rest when Jesus came up from the water. It is not clear whether the other people standing there saw the dove and heard the voice of God. The Gospel of John seems to indicate that John the Baptist was the only person to see and understand the full significance of what had just occurred (see John 1:32-34). For Christians who have received the sacrament of Baptism the

appearance of the dove of the Holy Spirit with the voice of the Father and the Person of the Son reminds us of our own baptism the second creation-the re-birth through water and the Holy Spirit (see Matthew 27:19). The voice of the father also reminds us of the messianic passage in Isaiah, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him" (Isaiah 42:1). Jesus is not, though, simply the servant of God but the very Son of God (Psalm 2:7). The voice of the Father confirms Jesus as the Messiah to John but it also commissions Jesus, the incarnate Son, to begin his ministry as the Anointed One. (See also Isaiah 61:1-2a and Luke 4:18-19.)

For further reading see *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, ed. Bernard Orchard, et al. Thomas Nelson & Sons, New York, 1953.

The story of John the Baptist was not only recorded in the New Testament. He was also written about by the Jewish writer Flavius Josephus (about AD 90) in his *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18, Chapter 5, Verse 2:

"Now some of the Jews thought that the destruction of Herod's army came from God, and that very justly, as a punishment of what he did against John, that was called the Baptist: for Herod slew him, who was a good man, and commanded the Jews to exercise virtue, both as to righteousness towards one another, and piety towards God, and so to come to baptism; for that the washing would be acceptable to him, if they made use of it, not in order to the putting away of some sins, but for the purification of the body; supposing still that the soul was thoroughly purified beforehand by righteousness. Now when others came in crowds about him, for they were very greatly moved by hearing his words, Herod, who feared lest the great influence John had over the people might put it into his power and inclination to raise a rebellion, (for they seemed ready to do any thing he should advise,) thought it best, by putting him to death, to prevent any mischief he might cause, and not bring himself into difficulties, by sparing a man who might make him repent of it when it would be too late. Accordingly he was sent a prisoner, out of Herod's suspicious temper, to Macherus, the castle I before mentioned, and was there put to death."