

***Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!***

What an infuriating person to interrogate John must have been! “Who are you?” “I am not the Christ”. “What then, are you Elijah?” “I am not.” “Are you the Prophet (like Moses, Deut 18.18)?” “No.” “Who are you then? We need to give an answer...” i.e. “give us some clue.” “I am the voice...” It is a vital clue, but seems to have been wasted on John’s interrogators.



So they try a different tack: “Then why are you baptizing?” John appears to parry this question. He knows there is something far more urgent for them to know, something they should know but do not: there already stands among them someone far greater than himself. The implicit message is: you’d do far better to go find out who *he* is, and what *he* will be doing, rather than bothering with me.

If the priests and Levites hung around John for another 24 hours (whether they did or not we do not know), then they would have received all the information about John they needed, and some. They’d have seen John baptize the person he had told them about, and they would have heard his testimony that the reason he came baptizing was so that Israel’s Messiah might be revealed to them – as the Son of God.

All four Gospel writers tell of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus at his baptism, and report that God’s voice was heard from heaven confirming that Jesus is his Son. Only John’s Gospel tells us that God revealed to John the Baptist, even as Jesus approached him for baptism, that he “is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” In this way Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan is linked to his baptism of suffering on the cross. Just as Israel’s exodus from Egypt concluded as she passed through the Jordan to enter the Promised Land, so Jesus’ baptism in the

Jordan heralded a new exodus was about to take place. It would be an exodus from the slavery of sin and death to the life of freedom for the children of God, those reborn of his Spirit. The way to this new life would be opened by Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. He would take the sin of the world upon himself, so that all who believe in him might pass freely from death to life.

The German painter Matthias Grunewald's anachronistic inclusion of John the Baptist with a lamb in his *Crucifixion* makes the same point, albeit from the other end of the Gospel: Jesus' baptism on the cross fulfils the words spoken at his baptism in the Jordan. John's "prodigious finger" (as Barth described it) ensures the point is not missed. At the same time we are reminded (in Latin, behind the finger) of the Baptist's great wish, "He must increase, but I must decrease." John doesn't record those words till chapter three, but this sentiment already pervades everything the Baptist says or does.

### **To ponder**

How do you bear witness that Jesus is the Son of God?

### **To pray**

Lord Jesus, you suffered so that I might be set free from my sins. Grant me the humility both to accept this truth and to desire, like John, that you might increase while I decrease. In your great name I pray. Amen

### **Reflections**