

# **“Journey with Jesus: River Adventure.”**

**Sunday 26 July 2009  
David Commander**

## **Readings:**

Isaiah 11:1-3a

Matthew 3:13-17

## **Sermon**

Journeying with Jesus! Wow, wouldn't that have been a great thing to actually do? What an adventure! And this time, a river adventure at that. The thing about journeys and adventures is that, with exciting ones, things are never the same afterwards as they were before.

It is often said that Jesus "work" started at the wedding in Cana, where the wine had run out. And Jesus performed the miracle of changing water into wine – gallons and gallons of the stuff; what a party! (Another story involving water! There are so many stories in the Bible involving water! Noah and the flood. Parting the sea in the exodus from Egypt. Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman: the "Water of Life". Jesus, and Peter, walking on the water. The disciples by the pool in Jerusalem. The disciples casting out their nets.)

But it is in this bit of scripture, the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, that things really start to rumble and begin to develop. Changes happen.

With this adventure, things were not the same for John the Baptist afterwards. And they were certainly not the same for Jesus afterwards. Not by a long way. And they were not the same for humankind afterwards either. This was the start of something. The start of something that is still exciting and changing people's lives all these years later.

And I want this picture to change as we go through. Let's see if we can change it from a simple black and white sketch into a colourful picture of Jesus baptism. Bring up any pictures that you've finished colouring in, at any time. Give them to Brian or Karen to stick onto our simple sketch. I want to see colour at the end of this!

The thing about rivers is they go somewhere. They go from the point where water springs up out of the ground, or from way up in the hills where rain is funnelled by the hills into the valleys. And as they flow they get bigger and bigger. And they finish up flowing all the way to the sea. They pass small, single crofts. They pass through little villages; through towns, and big cities. They are a means of transport. They can bring life to places: as water brings life to vegetation, to animals and then to humans. Rivers go somewhere and they do something.

Rivers can be big or small. They can be wide or narrow; shallow or deep; fast flowing or lazy. They can be clean or dirty.

And Jesus travelled to a river adventure. He would have walked from where he lived in Nazareth to this place on the river Jordan to meet with a man called John -

John the Baptist: a bit of a wild character by all accounts. The same story in John's gospel identifies this as a place called Bethany. Jesus went there to be baptised by John. John carried out his baptisms by standing in the middle of the river with them and either pouring water over them or perhaps immersing people completely in the river.

Symbolically, "baptism" was to wash you clean from your sin having recognised you'd done wrong and wanted to change. (So you might want to go away this week and have a think about why Jesus wanted to be baptised? He certainly didn't need to be baptised to "wash away his sin". So why was he baptised?)

Back to the scene: you might imagine that this would be some lovely fresh flowing water. Perhaps meandering down some tree-lined valley; with lush green grass on either bank and clear water making its way from hill to sea. Maybe something like the river Wye that Brian and Karen canoed along gently last week. After all, here is a river adventure that may have left Brian and Karen changed a little. Starting on it perhaps feeling a bit tense from all the efforts of parish work and diocesan work. And then gently paddling along and letting all those tensions go and enjoying the scenery and the peace and quiet. Feeling more relaxed afterwards. (Or perhaps it was physically quite hard, as they paddled against a current and they felt exhausted, but satisfied, after their journey along the river.)

But back to John the Baptist and Jesus; maybe the water collected at a pool on a bend in the river. And it would be here that John the Baptist would baptise people in the clean and restoring waters. Perhaps it was a scene like that where Jesus would come to meet John.

Or perhaps you have in mind a more fast flowing river. Somewhere where the cleansing power of the river could really be felt to be doing some good as a person is immersed into the water. Somewhere where the clean water can really wash away someone's sins – speaking metaphorically. Somewhere that would feel that it was really bringing new life to a person standing in it. Somewhere where you could feel the power of the river.

Was it in New Zealand that you went white-water rafting, Josh? I'm sure that is a river experience that leaves you feeling different afterwards. Perhaps because of the adrenalin rush and the exhilaration of getting down the river. Perhaps a scary moment when you get thrown out and finish up under the boat, thinking how am I going to get back in against the power of all this water? And, where's my paddle gone?! But when you finally get through the rapids, a real feeling of excitement at having completed something like that.

Certainly a change may have taken place as you go on such a journey, such an adventure on a river. Maybe it was to a more fast flowing river, just after some rapids, that Jesus went to meet John and then start his river adventure?

Or, more likely with Jesus, it was to some insignificant looking river, in a quite inhospitable terrain that Jesus came to. With brown parched hills coming down to a pretty small, slow moving, not too clean river. (Bottles of Jordan river water?) This is where Jesus came to his river adventure. But what made this river adventure so exciting? What was different "after" from "before" it happened?

How are those pictures coming along? Bring them up when you done one. You can always start another one.

Certainly things were different for John the Baptist. John and Jesus were pretty much the same sort of age. You remember the story of Mary and Elizabeth meeting when they were both pregnant, with Jesus and John respectively? And the unborn baby John leaping in his mother's womb when Mary and Elizabeth met – John being in the presence of Jesus. I find that a fascinating spiritual encounter – John certainly wouldn't have been able to see, hear or touch Jesus; but to react to his presence must have been a spiritual encounter; Jesus emitting some sort of spiritual presence and John receiving, feeling some sort of spiritual "touch".

John was a prophet; he was proclaiming the coming of "someone greater than I". That is the piece of scripture immediately before the gospel reading we had today: John preparing the way for Jesus' coming. But John had disciples, followers of his own. So his ministry was established; people knew of him, came to him, listened to him and were baptised by him.

John knew that he was doing preparatory work. But it would have been such a natural, human reaction to think, "Who's this coming along, and going to take my followers away from me? I'll no longer be the centre of attention. I'm not sure I want to carry on with this." But with John there was absolutely no envious reaction. On the contrary, John's reaction was, "I can't baptise you! I need to be baptised by you, not me baptising you!"

Can you imagine being there and seeing his reaction when he looked up and saw Jesus walking down the hill to the river; maybe coming and joining the queue of people who John was baptising? John knew who he was preparing the way for; and here he was, standing before him! And then wanting to be baptised! I can imagine it would have been nerve wracking for John.

Prior to this adventure, John had his own mission and his own disciples; his work was going well. Whilst his work might always have been preparing the way to another, after this event here was "the other". "Far greater than I. I baptise with the water of repentance. He will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire."

John had to put any ego or importance that he felt in the work that he was doing aside, so that he pointed all the time to Jesus. Are we prepared to do the same? Are we prepared to always point other people towards Jesus, whatever the cost to us? Perhaps losing our job because of our belief? Being prepared to lose our status so that we can point others to Jesus, and so others may see who Jesus is? Are we prepared to be changed that much for Jesus? John was.

Jesus too was changed by this exciting river adventure. Matthew 3: 16 – 17:

*"As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."*

*"He went up out of the water."* That's an interesting phrase. It seems to imply that Jesus was lifted bodily out of the water by some force, rather than simply climbing out of the river. But that is for better biblical scholars than I to mull over and pick out the significance of.

Jesus then saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and resting on him. Then heard a voice from heaven, the voice of the Father, speaking: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." Wow, what an amazing scene, an amazing event; the Son being blessed by the Father, and touched by the Spirit.

(Got any doves finished yet? Bring them up.) There aren't many pieces of scripture where Father, Son and Spirit are spoken about like this, in the same breath as it were. And after this event things changed for Jesus.

The next piece of scripture in Matthew's gospel is Jesus in the wilderness being tempted by Satan. Jesus wasn't a threat to Satan whilst he was a carpenter in Nazareth. But now, blessed by the Father and touched by the Spirit he started to become a threat, so Satan tried to change things too. And after this Jesus starts to call some men to follow him, and then we move onto the story at the wedding at Cana, and the sign of changing water into wine. This river adventure was the beginning of a change for Jesus.

And Jesus' walk to the river and baptism in it by John were the beginning of a change for us too, two thousand years later. It is an event that impacts on our lives today. Though it is never mentioned by name in the Bible, here we have the Trinity at work again: God the Father speaking, God the Son starting his earthly ministry, and God the Holy Spirit acting in someone: to empower and to help resist the temptations of Satan; as he does still, for us, today.

This event would eventually lead Jesus to Calvary and to his death – and then his wonderful resurrection. And that journey is definitely having an impact on our lives today. And it all started here at the river. With a river adventure that caused changes. Changes for individuals. Changes for nations. Changes over many, many years.

- a) Speaking of changes: how's our picture coming along? Is that changing? Wow, it has changed hasn't it?!
- b) Our lives change when we become Christian's. Speak to the people on your table; how has their life changed since becoming a Christian? What is exciting about being a Christian?

This is the start of our looking at the journeys of Jesus. We have started by looking at this river adventure; that changed Jesus, changed John the Baptist, and can change us. Rivers move things. Rivers change things. As we journey along our river of life, are we just going to hang on and be carried along? Are we going to try and paddle against the current and make things hard for ourselves? Or are we prepared to be changed by the adventure, so that one day God may say of us:

"This is my son, this is my daughter - whom I love.  
With him, with her, I am well pleased." Amen.