

Just when you think you have got a bible story taped, along comes a reading from St John's gospel which raises a host of new questions.

We think we know all about John the Baptist. It talks about him and his mother Elizabeth in Luke's gospel. Mary was sent to stay with Elizabeth in her pregnancy – we have those wonderful words of the Magnificat. Yet here we have John saying 'I myself did not know him'. How could John the Baptist not know Jesus?

We also know all about John baptising Jesus. Just last week we had Matthew's version of this event with the description of the Spirit of God resting upon Jesus like a dove and the voice from heaven saying 'This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.'

Look again at the text. Where does it say in John's gospel that Jesus was baptised by John. It does talk about the Spirit visibly descending upon Jesus and we fill in the gaps.

It has sometimes been suggested that the synoptic gospels, that is Matthew, Mark and Luke, are more historical than John's gospel, but I am not sure that there is evidence for that. The style is more like a history or biography, but that tells us nothing. All four gospels are at pains to show the good news of the Christ, but they have very different ways of convincing their readers. Matthew's gospel is written primarily for a Jewish readership and that is very clear in the text – there are loads of references to how Jesus fulfils the prophecies. Mark's gospel is written during a time of oppression and one senses that turmoil and change, it is fast moving and under the surface there are constant references to the demonic powers at work. Luke's gospel seems to have been written for a more diverse audience, and emphasises the work of the Spirit enabling work with the outcasts and the poor. It is about the here and now, the kingdom around us. John's gospel, by contrast, is all about the glory of Christ, a glory that is eternal, that is there for all who have eyes to see it.

It isn't surprising there were different interpretations. The period of history immediately after the death of Christ was one of enormous religious activity, a sort of melting pot of ideas and theories. It was generally believed that Elijah would be the forerunner to any Messiah. And we can see from the description of John the Baptist in many of the gospels that he is dressed like Elijah. The links are made obvious. In John's gospel, John the Baptist states quite categorically, I am not Elijah, I am not the Messiah. John is the author not only of the 'I am' sayings of Jesus but also of the 'I am not sayings' of John the Baptist. Everything written is to show that John the Baptist is a great man, but an ordinary man. He baptises with water. He is the one who prepares the way. But Jesus and only

Jesus is the one who baptises with the Spirit. Jesus is the one who is the Son of God, the Word made flesh, the lamb of God.

At the time, and we know this from the book of Acts, John the Baptist had many followers, probably far more after his death than during his lifetime. He had preached a gospel of repentance, but there were those who thought that he was Elijah reincarnated and some that thought he was the messiah. This passage is written for them. John the Baptist baptised only in order that people might be prepared to see the true Messiah, Jesus, to behold his glory.

It is this glory that calls the disciples.

In the other gospels the call of the first disciples can seem almost as if it happened by chance. Walking along the beach, seeing a couple of people fishing, Jesus says 'follow me' and they drop everything and go. Not so here. Two disciples, one of whom seems to have been Andrew, heard John the Baptist refer to Jesus as the Lamb of God. This term, used by the evangelist, has so many resonances – the Eucharist, the sacrificial lamb, the triumphant lamb of the Revelation of St John the Divine – and it obviously intrigued these two disciples sufficiently for them to follow Jesus. And they went back with Jesus to his house and talked with him for hours. The following day Andrew goes to fetch his brother Simon, with the words, we have found the Messiah. Andrew took Simon to Jesus and Jesus calls him the rock, Cephas, Peter.

Andrew was not convinced by miracles, no huge catch of fish, but by being in the presence of Jesus. He was with him, spoke with him and he saw, he understood, he knew, Jesus was the Son of God.

The people for whom John is writing will not meet Jesus. Jesus the man has died. They will not see Jesus perform miracles. Yet they can believe and become disciples as Simon Peter did and so can we.

We do not need miracles. In fact if we saw a miracle the probability is that we would spend our time looking for a rational explanation. But we do need our eyes opened to the glory of Christ.

John begins his gospel, 'in the beginning was the word.' This glory of Christ is not just for a particular point in history, nor even for a particular age, it is beyond time. When we encounter Christ we begin to understand how small we are in relation to the whole of created space and time, but also how important our contribution is to the wholeness of creation. We have been given power to be co-creators or destroyers, to be bearers of God's love or to be hoarders, who gobble up all that is good for themselves.

To see the glory of Christ is to be given responsibility.

Simon Peter, so new in his understanding of what has been revealed to him, has already been given this responsibility by being named Peter, the rock, the one who will build the church.

The imagery conjured up by John's writing is both beautiful and scary. John's gospel will not provide you with an easy code of conduct, which if you follow will make you a Christian. It will challenge you, make you feel small, for it is a gospel the splendour and the majesty of God and of Christ his Son our Lord.

Above all it is the gospel that invites us to come and see. Come and have our eyes opened. Come and see the glory of Christ. Amen.