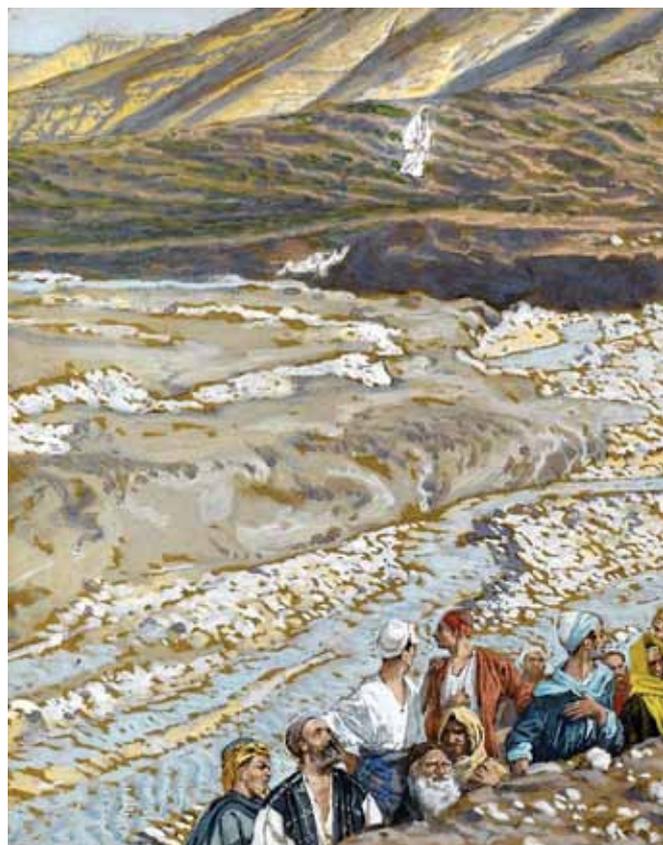


# John the Baptist

KATHLEEN RUSHSTON explains the difference between John the Baptist in John's Gospel from the other Gospels and the message he calls us to understand.

Painting: *John the Baptist Sees Jesus from Afar* by James Tissot



No character is more associated with Advent, the coming of Jesus or the *advent-ure* a disciple undertakes by following the way of life set out by Jesus than John, known as the Baptist or the Baptiser. The evangelist well may have assumed that those who first heard the Fourth Gospel proclaimed knew about him. No mention is made of John's clothing, denouncing people, baptising Jesus, his imprisonment or death. Instead, he is quite a different character (John 1:6-8, 15, 19-37; 3:22-36; 5:31-47; 10:41). John uses an analogy to sum up his relationship with Jesus. He is "the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices at the bridegroom's voice" (Jn 3:29).

## "A Man Sent from God"

A move occurs from the cosmic (Jn 1:1-5) to earth. Events happen in time and place: "There was a man sent from God." In this Gospel's textual world, the only other character described as "sent from God" is Jesus (Jn 1:14, 6:46; 7:29; 9:33; 16:27; 17:18). The stage is set for John's role of bearing witness to Jesus (Jn 1:7; 15, 32, 34, 3:32; 5:33). His cry of witness rings out through this Gospel's early scenes. The other Gospels tell us: "A voice came from heaven: 'This/You are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased'", while in the Fourth Gospel, John testifies: "I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God" (Jn 1:34). He is the first in a line of witnesses: the Woman of Samaria (Jn 4:39),

the works of Jesus (Jn 5:36; 10:25); the Scriptures (Jn 5:39), the crowd (Jn 12:17); the Advocate (Jn 15:26), the followers of Jesus (Jn 15:27) and the Father (Jn 5:32, 37; 8:18).

## Jesus Sets Out a Way of Living

A distinctive feature of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel is that he sets out a way of living. No mention is made of the reign (*basileia*) of God or of the heavens. Instead, Jesus is presented as having people seek him out to become disciples. Disciples are followers of a teacher from whom they learn a way of living. Jesus, the teacher, sets out a way of living centred on attachment to him. Knowing him is a process of unfolding discovery, a lifelong pilgrimage.

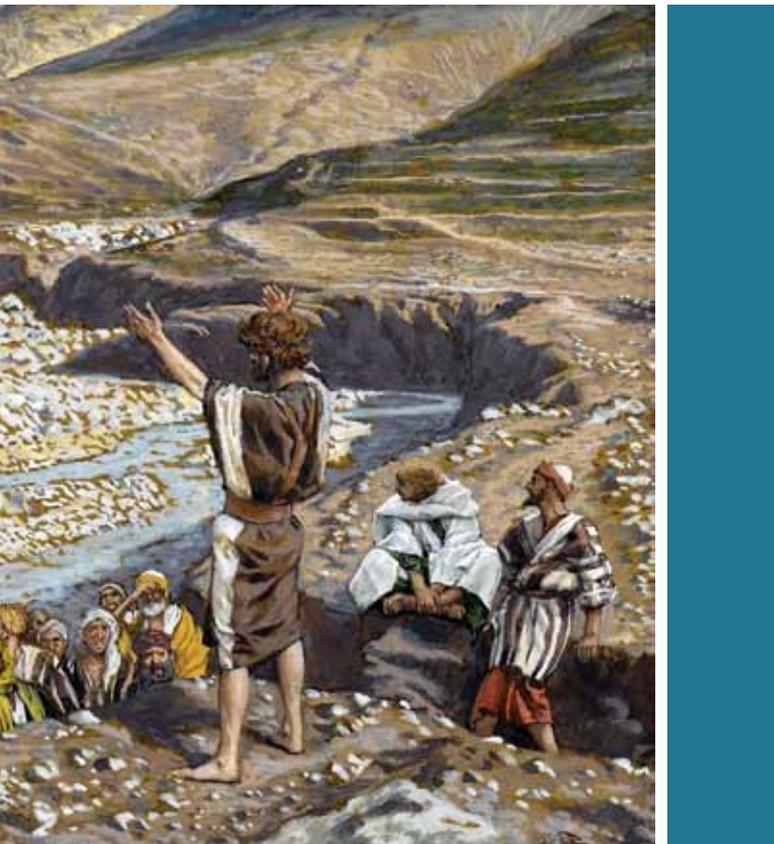
John not only has his origins with God but also the Holy Spirit, the one who will "abide" with the disciples and who will continue the works of God. The Spirit enters the human story through his testimony: "I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained (*menō*) on him" (Jn 1:32). It is on John's lips that we first heard the word *menō*, found 40 times and translated in Bibles as "stay", "continue", "remains", "endure", "live", "dwell", "abide". This word characterises the relationship between God and Jesus, the Spirit and Jesus, and Jesus and disciples. *Menō* describes what being a disciple is all about — abiding in Jesus.

## First Concern

John's social status and honour came from his father, Zechariah, a faithful rural priest. Concern arose in Jerusalem because John was behaving like a prophet which was not in keeping with his priestly heritage. The traditional tension between priests and prophets lingers. So, the Pharisees sent priests and Levites (Jn 1:19, 24) with two concerns. The first concern is about the identity of

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John: “Who are you?” John denies he is the Messiah, Elijah or “the prophet.” Then, adapting the words of Isaiah who says “a voice cries out” (Jn 40:3), John declares he is that voice: “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord.”

Why the Jordan? Why in wilderness? The location where John was baptising is full of meaning for his questioners. He is not preaching or baptising in villages or cities but in the wilderness and most likely where the people of Israel once crossed the Jordan to enter a new land – the Promised Land. He is preaching to Israel. A new Exodus and new coming into the Promised Land is near. Hosts of associations are evoked. The Jordan River is found as a proper name in over 80 contexts in the Old Testament. Crossing of the Jordan is a recurring motif. Time and again, mention is made of its strong flow. Crossing into that green, fertile land was not easy.

## Second Concern

A second concern is the question of why John is baptising: “Why are you baptising?” Baptism was common in the ancient world both within and beyond Judaism. The rite derived meaning from a particular tradition or context and was regarded as symbolic. John’s questioners, therefore, wanted to know what his baptism meant. In Mark and Luke, it was “a baptism for the forgiveness of sins”. Not so in the Fourth Gospel. John, who baptises with water, says one is coming his questioners do not know. He continues: “The one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal” (Jn 1:26-27). Implied here, and later, is John’s testimony that the One who will come

will bring a deeper, more radical purification. Clearly he points to Jesus’ divine identity. The role of John is subordinated – untying sandals was slave’s work.

## Bethany-beyond-the Jordan

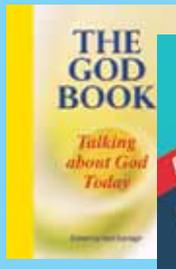
John is not described specifically as baptising people “in the River Jordan” but in Bethany across the Jordan (Jn 1:28) – a site known today as Al Maghtas in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. While the exact location is unknown, he is placed in the powerful mythic landscape of the Jordan River. Mythic because most Jews and Christians – throughout history and today – have never visited there so it retains its strangeness and mystery through time. Our knowledge of the symbolism of the purifying water of this region comes through biblical texts and cultural traditions. A huge gap exists between rich biblical symbolism and material reality today.

The River Jordan is in an area of the planet most threatened by a decline in water supply. Generations of intense conflict is inflamed easily by water shortage. Most pilgrims who visit the three possible baptismal sites, and those who hear this Gospel proclaimed, are unaware these sacred waters are both an intently watched international border and polluted. Moral theologian Christiana Peppard describes this river as “a limp toxic strip of water. A warning sign conveys the hazard posed by coming into contact with this water.” There is little Christian ethical engagement with the waters of the Jordan. She continues: “The material and symbolic status of the river needs to be drawn together more tightly if ecology is indeed a vital part of faith.” Such ethical engagement permeates the remarkable documentary film, *Seven Rivers Walking – Haere Mārire*. This series of *hiko* (walks) along seven Canterbury rivers began on Ash Wednesday, 2017, as an act of repentance.

In *whakawhānaungatanga* (making right relationship happen), during Advent we join liturgically and creatively with our ancestors who expressed the relationship of John and Jesus, who in sandals walked the Earth (Jn 1:27), in the rhythms of the Universe. The birth of John is celebrated on 24 June (mid-summer in northern hemisphere) when the sun begins to decrease. The birth of Jesus is celebrated on 25 December at the time of the midwinter solstice when light begins to increase. How are we like John, who is not the light, but in the words of Jesus “was a lamp that was kindled and shining” (Jn 5:35)? ✨

Third Sunday of Advent – John 1:6-8, 19-28  
Roman Lectionary and Revised Common Lectionary

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