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A Voice in the Wilderness (Matthew 3)

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John the Baptist's ministry prepares the people for the manifestation of Jesus.

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Transcript

Welcome back to this, the third in my series on the Gospel of Matthew. Today we're looking at chapter three of the Gospel of Matthew, the ministry of John the Baptist and the baptism of Jesus. John the Baptist comes on the scene in Matthew's Gospel as if someone we should already know.

Now, that's not entirely surprising when we consider that John the Baptist was a figure of great importance for the early Jesus movement. John the Baptist was the figure who represented the beginning of Jesus' movement. In the Gospel of Luke, it is the beginning of the story of Luke is with the annunciation of John the Baptist's birth.

And the miraculous events surrounding the birth of John the Baptist are given considerable attention, not least in the statements of Zachariah, his father. In the book of Acts, we see something similar. To be an apostle, or at least to be a fitting candidate to be an apostle as a replacement for Judas, someone had to have witnessed the

ministry of John the Baptist and seen the resurrected Christ.

Now, the fact that John the Baptist is so significant is something that we'll be considering within this episode. John the Baptist is also independently historically testified to in the book of Josephus. We know he's an important figure of the time, even outside of the biblical text.

It's not merely the fact that he is referenced within the biblical text that makes him important. He is someone who was recognized to be important even by those who are telling independent histories of the time. He comes in the wilderness baptizing.

And the practice of baptism is one that has drawn obviously considerable reflection and discussion. Now, I think it's logical that what he's doing is something that's related to previous and existing practices. He's taking an existing symbolic matrix of practices, and he's performing a unique form of this that helps him to convey his message.

So, we can think about the ritual practices of washing that existed within the sacrificial system, within Jewish ritual washings for purity, within proselyte baptisms, things like that. All of these were existing Jewish practices that had similarities with what John the Baptist was doing. Likewise, as we've discovered about the Qumran community and the Dead Sea Scrolls and learned more about the Essenes, we've discovered that there were other baptism or there were other communities practicing ritual washings at the time in the wilderness.

And so, these were existing themes and rituals that were being explored by various communities. Whether John the Baptist was himself an Essene is a matter of dispute. I don't think he was.

There were other characters like Banas and others who's referenced within Josephus who did practice similar things and have similar associations. I think what this does teach us is that there was a wider significance for this practice of baptism. It wasn't just an esoteric practice that John the Baptist brought in out of the blue.

He was working within a symbolic framework of Jewish ritual washings, and he was developing his particular practice within an understandable framework that people would have been able to understand a part of what he was doing in the process. Now, there are distinct features of John the Baptist's baptism, not least the fact that he seems to be performing this baptism upon people himself. This isn't self-baptism as most of the ritual washings would be.

He's drawing upon earlier covenant and natural symbolism. Water does have a natural symbolism. It connects us to things.

Water is a medium within which two things can be joined together. It's something that washes and purifies, and so moral purification can be seen as reflected in washing the

body. Likewise, it's a matter of transition.

You move from one realm to another through water. It's a medium between things. We can think about the identity of Israel being defined by water crossings, so it has a covenant significance.

It is the water crossing of the Red Sea, the crossing that divides life before in slavery in Egypt and after wandering through the wilderness in the Exodus. It's the border of the Jordan entering into the promised land, beginning to take inheritance. It's the Jabbok where Jacob receives the new name of Israel, and Israel becomes a new people.

It's the Euphrates crossing over this river on the other side of which they serve foreign gods. So in all of these ways, Israel's life is bounded by certain water crossings, water crossings that have a natural and a covenantal significance, and John the Baptist is working with this. Also think about the differences between different bodies of water.

Water below, you can be drowned in. It's something that's connected with the great deep of the original creation, and then waters above, they're waters of blessing, the waters of rain, the waters that come down from heaven. And so the commerce between heaven and earth is seen also within the water cycle.

So all of this is the world within which John the Baptist is developing his practice of baptism, a practice of baptism that looks back to former practices associated with leprosy as well. Washing to re-enter the camp, having to go outside of the camp as someone who's defiled, who recognizes that you're impure, and then being washed to re-enter as a sort of reaffirmation of your fundamental identity as a member of the people of God. And so all of these things are part of the wide background in which John the Baptist is operating.

This is distinct from later Christian baptism. It's something that is connected but distinct. Christian baptism is drawing upon much of the same symbolism, but there are other elements that come into play, not least the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is part of the fundamental meaning that we're united to Christ, that the Spirit, we're baptized with the Spirit, etc.

Now, certain aspects of the natural symbolism of water also come into sharper relief. We are baptized into one body. The unifying character of water washing is something that is more pronounced within Christian baptism than it is within the baptism of John the Baptist.

John the Baptist comes declaring the Kingdom of Heaven. The Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God, is God's reign coming about in history. It's something that is given with a prophetic announcement, an announcement that there is the fulfillment of this great word declared by Isaiah the prophet in chapter 40 of his prophecy.

So God is about to come back to his people, this great train of people returning from exile. God is going to re-establish his reign in the midst of his people. So this can maybe originally refer to the return from Babylon, but it refers to something greater beyond that, and John the Baptist heralds this greater deliverance from exile, the deliverance from exile that God is going to bring about in this new exodus, in this coming of his son.

Yahweh is coming to rule, and this expectation of Yahweh coming to rule is seen within the prophet as the watchmen look out from the gates and they see, as it were, this dust plume within the desert as God is coming towards the land and going to dwell in the midst of his people once again. As people from all parts of the world that have been scattered abroad return to the land, and there's a re-establishment of God's reign and his people's security. Fulfillment statements like this one are predominantly found in the early and later parts of Matthew.

Within the middle they're not found so commonly, but they frame our expectation of Christ's ministry. Christ is fulfilling what the prophets declared. He's playing out the story of Israel in a way that brings it to its proper climax.

He's replaying the motifs of Israel's life and bringing them to their fullest form of expression. Now, John the Baptist is described for us, he's described for us as one who wears a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist and his food was locusts and wild honey. Now, when we read the we should notice just how sparse, scenic details are.

We just do not know what most people ate. We're not told that. We're not told most of these details, nor are we really told how anyone dresses.

Do you ever really read about how Jesus dresses or how he appears? There are some fleeting illusions that could be taken that way, but for the most part there's nothing. And so when we do encounter such details they're probably given to us for a reason other than just historical verisimilitude. It's not just that the gospel writer wants us to develop a picture in our mind.

It's not about getting a picture in your mind, it's about drawing certain connections to understand what type of person John the Baptist was. And so the first thing to notice is he is dressing like Elijah the Tishbite. Elijah's description, the description of Elijah in 2nd Kings chapter 1 verse 8 is of a man who wore a garment of hair with a belt of leather around his waist and he said it is Elijah the Tishbite.

We see similar descriptions of prophetic dress within the book of Zechariah. In Zechariah chapter 13 verse 4, on that day every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies. He will not put on a hairy cloak in order to deceive.

So John the Baptist is coming dressed as a prophet and as a particular prophet. He

reminds us of Elijah the Tishbite. And as we read through the gospel of Matthew we'll see that the connection between John the Baptist and Elijah is stronger than that still.

In chapter 17 verses 10 following, or in chapter 17 verses 10 following, and the disciples asked him then why did the scribes say that first Elijah must come? He answered Elijah does come and he will restore all things but I tell you that Elijah has already come and they did not recognize him but did to him whatever they pleased. So also the son of man will certainly suffer at their hands. Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.

Think about the character of Elijah. Elijah is associated with the wilderness. He dresses in a particular way and most importantly for our purpose he reminds us of the last prophecies of the Old Testament.

In the last page of your Old Testament, in the last chapter, in the last verses you read the following. Behold I will send to you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers lest I come and strike the land with the decree of utter destruction. So Elijah is promised before God arrives on the scene he's going to send a herald before him and this herald is going to be a prophet.

He's going to be a one who comes in the spirit and the power of Elijah as Zechariah is told in Luke chapter 1. The angel Gabriel tells him that this son that he's going to have will come in the spirit and power of Elijah and so there's this baton of Old Testament prophecy taken up at the beginning of the new. This is one who dresses like the Old Testament prophets. This is the one who fulfills the last of the great Old Testament prophecies in the ordering of the scriptures and he's the one that's going to hand the baton on to the Messiah who's going to bring in the kingdom.

He eats locusts and wild honey. These are things that occur naturally they're not things that need to be cultivated by humanity. He's detached from the structures of society, from the economic order.

He's not buying his food. He's finding it wild. He's living in the wilderness off the land and he's connected with the poor.

He dresses like a poor person. As we see the prophets in the Old Testament and particularly characters like Elijah, they were often associated with the poor. They were fugitives.

They were refugees. They were people who did not have a settled abode. They wandered around as peripatetic people wandering from place to place and finding support and shelter by people who are supporting them.

Now this is the sort of life that John the Baptist lives just as Elijah. He's associated with

the wilderness. He eats locusts.

Locusts throughout the scripture are generally associated with enemies of the people of God. In their vast array, the vast armies of these enemies, they're described like locusts. Occasionally Israel might be compared to locusts as the plague of the locusts in Egypt.

It might be a symbol of Israel's own status within the land of Egypt where their multiplying numbers are seen to be a threat and it's a wind that blows them towards the Red Sea that removes them from the land. And that may symbolise God's requirement that Pharaoh let his people go. That he sees the people like locusts threatening the land.

Now he should let the people go like the locusts that he wants removed from the land. That might be part of what's going what's taking place. As he's eating locusts he's taking in or maybe devouring the devourers.

The people who would destroy these great enemies that would destroy the land or it could be seen as including. Peter Lighthouse has suggested that locusts as they were connected with the enemies, the ravaging enemies of the people of God, that by eating the locusts there's a sense of inclusion. Now notice that diet was very important within the story of Israel.

It was symbolic. What you ate was symbolic of certain associations. There were clean animals and there were unclean animals.

There were animals that were sacrificial animals and animals that were not. And the sort of animals that you ate created certain associations. And so he's connected with camels.

He's connected with locusts and he's connected with wild honey. And in all of these associations he's connected with the world of the wilderness. But he's also one who's taking into himself these forces that are outside of the land associated with the wilderness, associated with the outsiders and the Gentiles.

And maybe this is continuing themes that we see elsewhere in the beginning of Matthew's Gospel. That this inclusion of Gentiles within the story, taking of the Gentiles into the genealogy of Christ, the events of the Magi coming from the east with treasures from Arabia or the fact that Christ takes refuge in the land of Egypt. The story of the Gentiles is mixed in with the stories of the Jews at this point and there's a sort of flattening out of certain distinctions.

Maybe that's part of what's taking place in John the Baptist. I think we'll see more of that as we go along. The honey is associated with the land.

It's the sustenance of the land. It's wild honey. It's uncultivated.

This is the land in its raw form providing sustenance. Locusts and wild honey may be

bringing together those two things. They're both wild and uncultivated.

It's a return to the state of exodus, provision within the wilderness of unprepared food. Quail, the creatures of flight, and then manna, which is like coriander and honey. And so those two things, locusts and wild honey, may be connected with quail and manna.

I don't know. These are all speculations. See what you make of it.

The location again is important. It's in the wilderness. These are themes of exodus, themes of exile, being outside of the land, placing yourself.

And you have to go outside of the land if you're going to be, or outside of the land, the realm of habitation, still within the land, but outside of the realm of habitation to be baptized by John. To represent yourself as someone who's excluded, an outsider, someone who's a fugitive perhaps. This is a realm also connected with forces that have not yet been domesticated.

It's a realm of wild beasts. It's a realm of demons and evil spirits. In much prophecy, it's connected with those things.

We see it in Revelation, for instance. Outside of society in order to be baptized for repentance. Part of this is recognizing where you stand.

That if you're an Israelite coming to be baptized by John the Baptist, you must recognize that you are in a sort of state of exile. You do not have the firm possession of the land and status within it as the children of Abraham, as you might think. There's a precarious character to your identity within the land.

And in truth, your spiritual state is still in a state of exile. And so, John the Baptist's baptism is connected with a recognition of a certain exclusion from society, an entrance back into that primitive state of the Exodus experience, re-entering that state in order that being baptized in the Jordan, you might re-enter the land again. And that through repentance, you might possess the land in a new way.

And so, it's that boundary marker by which Israel entered into the land for the first time. Now, the Jordan is within the land, but to baptize in the Jordan is to make that great crossing that is associated with entrance into the land in the first place. The other thing to notice is that these sorts of washings were typically the way that outsiders were included within the people of Israel.

Pagans wanting to join Israel would have been subject to proselyte baptism. They would have repented and been baptized. But Israelites are here being treated in the same way.

As we read in Luke's Gospel, there is a sort of flattening out of the distinctions between soldiers who would have been Romans, presumably, and Israelites. They're all called to

repentance and they're all called to submit to baptism. There's a sense in which Israel's privileged status is being challenged that simply because you are a descendant of Abraham does not mean that you are safe, does not mean that you are included in the way that you might have thought.

This is in keeping with John's message, the practice of baptism, where everyone is subject to a sort of proselyte baptism. Everyone is represented as outside the camp, having to reaffirm their status as Israelites, in a way maybe reminiscent of the washing for leprosy as well. This is in keeping with the message that Jewish ancestry is no guarantee of safety as God comes to his people.

It sets the terms also for much of the rest of the New Testament message about Jews and Gentiles and it keeps with the themes of Matthew to this point, as we've seen with the inclusion of Gentiles and the importance that they have. John the Baptist challenges the scribes and the Pharisees and whereas we see Gentiles and other figures included within this number elsewhere in the other gospels, here it's focusing upon the Pharisees and the Sadducees, that these are people who might presume upon their status and John the Baptist challenges their assumption that the merit of Abraham or their status as his children, that that will protect them. Indeed he calls them brood of vipers.

What might be going on there? First of all, brood of vipers, seed of the serpent. You're not truly children of Abraham, you're the seed of the serpent. You're the seed of the wicked one.

That's one way of thinking about it. Craig Keener also suggests an allusion to the notion that vipers were mother killers, so they're set against their ancestors and not just not walking in their ways, they're actually emergently opposed to their ancestors. Jesus can say a similar thing in Matthew chapter 23, that they bear witness to themselves that their ancestors were the ones that killed the prophets and so they may think that they are secure as the children of Abraham but really the true children of Abraham are the ones that they are killing and he calls them to, if you're truly the children of Abraham, you must produce the fruit of repentance.

Trees and fruit are important themes within this chapter. A statement that children can be raised from the stones maybe alludes to Isaiah chapter 51 verse 1 to 2, the fact that Abraham is a rock from which Israel was hewn and so returning to the rock that barren Abraham and Sarah, they were barren, they were not bearing any children and God out of their barrenness brought life, brought children into their life in Isaac. Now there's also probably a play upon words here in Aramaic and in Hebrew, Bnei and Abnei in Aramaic and Banim and Abanim in Hebrew.

The axe is laid to the root of the trees. Again these are very powerful and potent reminders of Old Testament prophecy. As we look through the Old Testament this imagery of trees being cut down is found on several occasions, not least within the story

of Isaiah.

Isaiah is one that plays a lot upon this sort of arboreal symbolism. We've already seen a possible reference to Jesus as the branch. That's something that comes within the story of Isaiah.

Jesus is as a root out of dry ground, he's the branch. We talk about the stump that's left as Israel is judged. The axe, it cuts down this great forest of Israel and the axe is that of Assyria.

In chapter 10 of Isaiah, it talks about the axe of Syria, shall the axe boast over him who hews with it? Will the saw magnify itself against him who wheels it? And then later on he talks about a burning being kindled and then the light of Israel will become a fire and his holy one a flame and it will burn and devour his thorns and briars in one day. The glory of his forest and of his fruitful land the Lord will destroy both soul and body and it will be as when a sick man wastes away the remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few that a child could write them down. Later on, behold the Lord God of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power, the great in height will be hewn down and the lofty will be brought low.

He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe and Lebanon will fall by the majestic one. So God is coming with an axe and with a fire and he's going to cleanse this whole land. He's going to deal with those who are haughty and high and lift it up.

He's going to cut down the mighty boughs and cedars and he's going to establish his kingdom in the place of this. Now this is an event that calls for national repentance, general repentance. This is not just a subset of the wicked, a few people in Israel that need to repent.

The whole nation is included in this judgment and here again we need to keep in mind the political dimensions of all that's taking place. We tend to read the New Testament so individualistically that we miss what's taking place. When Christ is saving his people from their sins it's not just a few individuals here and there that are associated with Christ.

It's people as a nation, as a body of people and in the same way as John the Baptist talks about this judgment he's talking about a judgment upon a people that's coming, not just a few individuals. It calls for a general repentance and he alludes to Old Testament prophecy here not just in the final words of as the Elijah that's to come but as the one who's speaking of the Lord coming to his temple in Malachi chapter 3. So John the Baptist I think is alluding to that sort of prophecy but he talks about the threshing floor. Now I think this is based upon the prophecy of Malachi 3 but it's a transposition of the symbolism.

Think about what the symbolism of the threshing floor represented in the Old Testament.

It's associated with the temple. The temple was built upon the threshing floor of the Jebusite and so this threshing floor symbolizes not just it's the threshing floor at the center of Israel where God is preparing the grain, where God is removing the chaff.

The chaff blows away and the righteous grain is restored. This is a place where God's people come together for judgment and blessing and here Israel more generally is represented as facing this temple judgment. God's going to clean out his house.

He's going to come to his temple. He's going to come to his holy nation and everyone's going to be winnowed and we will see as a result the wicked chaff being burnt up and blown away and the righteous grain being stored and established and so this is part of the basis of what John the Baptist ministry involves. It's the arrival of this climactic judgment.

John the Baptist's baptism anticipates something much greater. He talks about this one who's coming after him. He's not worthy to untie his sandals.

Is there some connection between sandals and threshing floor? Perhaps. We look back in Deuteronomy. It may be a connection between not muzzling the ox and the sandal of the one who has to perform the leveret marriage.

Perhaps. Think about it a bit more. Think also about stories such as the uncovering of Boaz's feet on the threshing floor by Ruth and all the symbolism taking place there.

These may be things that are involved in removing the sandal from the feet. What's taking place? John is preaching the gospel. Now we tend to think of the gospel as a method of salvation.

It's often how evangelicals have represented it. That's not actually what the gospel is. The gospel is the message of Christ, of God's coming reign, that God is coming to rule and that that statement of hope and anticipation of God coming to dwell in his people, to restore his people's fortunes, to establish them and to establish his presence among them.

That is the gospel. Now that gospel is a message of judgment too. The Lord is king.

The Lord is coming to rule. Jesus is Lord. All of these are forms of the gospel and it's good news to the people who are awaiting his coming, to those who have repented, but to those who have not, it's devastating news of judgment and destruction.

And so these two things come together in the preaching of the kingdom of God, in the preaching of the good news. Note also the use of that good news language back in the prophecy of Isaiah and the way that he uses that language in connection with all of these themes. Yahweh is coming to reign.

He's returning to his people. He's going to rule and bring judgment and blessing to his people and that is the good news. That is the gospel.

John preaches the gospel and he baptises and Jesus comes to be baptised by John. Why is Jesus baptised? The incongruity of Jesus, the one who's coming after John the Baptist, who's much greater than him, being baptised is recognised by John himself who objects to this and Jesus responds, it's fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness. What's involved there? What is Jesus referring to? Now let me suggest a few possible options and I think all of these are true and are a particular dimension of what's taking place.

First of all, the righteousness in view is not just an individual righteousness. It's God's saving righteousness. The righteousness to be revealed in the fullness of time as the fulfilment of prophecy.

The fulfilment of righteousness is God's saving righteousness that fulfils all this prophetic anticipation. Christ is coming to identify with his people. It's a symbolic association with Israel, the penitent Israel.

He comes and he joins with the people. In the gospel of Luke, I think it is, it talks about the fact that when all the people had been baptised, Jesus came to be baptised also. Jesus comes as it were when the full complement of Israel that has repented and been baptised by John has been gathered together, then Christ comes, identifies with them and he's going to be the one that's going to lead them in this new exodus.

And so that's part of what's taking place I think. Think back to the original exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea, that is an event that Paul can describe as being baptised into Moses. And in chapter 14 of Exodus, it's described as something that led the people to believe in Moses, that this was an event of trusting Moses as God's messenger, an event that led them to be associated with Moses in a new way.

Note that Moses himself had a sort of prefiguration of this crossing in his deliverance from out of the water as an infant. And many of the themes that are associated with that event recur in the event of the Red Sea crossing. So in a similar way, Christ identifies with penitent Israel at this point.

He's the one that's going to lead them in the route that's to come. And so fulfilling righteousness is partly involved with that. It's also handing on the baton.

If we think about the way that John the Baptist has continued from the last great prophets of the Old Testament, he takes the last words, the last prophecies of the book of Malachi and he continues those on. He's the one who alludes to Zachariah in various ways and he's the one who takes on the mantle of Elijah. He dresses as Elijah, as a one who comes in the spirit and the power of Elijah, who represents that great prophet who maybe stands for the prophetic ministry more generally.

As he comes as that figure, he's passing on the baton to the one who will succeed him. And so Christ is a prophet but he's the great prophet, the prophet foretold by Moses. And so John the Baptist handing on the baton to Christ, that's part of how righteousness is being fulfilled in this event.

The baton is handed on to John himself in various ways. We see this particularly in Luke's gospel and now John hands on the baton to Christ, the greater one who succeeds him. Think also of transitions that occur at the Jordan.

Moses, a prophet associated with the wilderness, associated with the exodus through the wilderness, hands on the baton at the Jordan to Joshua who leads the way into the promised land. Moses leads the people through the Red Sea. Joshua leads the people through the Jordan into the promised land.

Moses, the man of the wilderness. Joshua, the man of the land. Elijah, a man who's a prophet associated with the wilderness as we've seen lots of associations with John the Baptist and we'll see more of those as we go through the book.

Now he and Elijah, his ministry is succeeded by that of Elijah on the banks of the Jordan. They go to the far side of the Jordan, there is the ascension of Elijah and then the spirit of Elijah descends upon Elisha and Elisha crosses over miraculously over the Jordan, enters into Jericho and there's this playing out of the themes of Moses and Joshua again. A desert prophet succeeded by a land prophet in both cases.

Note also the similarities in the names. Joshua is the same name as Jesus has. Jesus, Yeshua is the new Joshua.

He's the one Yahweh saves and we see a similar thing in Elisha's name. Elisha's name that God is savior. These things hold these characters together.

They have very great similarities and so bringing that pairing together is one of the things that happens in the baptism of Jesus by John. John also recognizes Jesus as the great baptizer, the one who will baptize the people with the Holy Spirit and with fire and so he's a witness to Jesus. Later on in Matthew's gospel we see this as Jesus challenged for his authority points to the ministry of John the Baptist.

Why what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority? Jesus answered them. I also will ask you one question and if you tell me the answer then I also will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, where did it come from? From heaven or from man? And they discussed it among themselves saying if we say from heaven he will say to us why then did you not believe him? But if we say from man we are afraid of the crowd for they all hold that John was a prophet.

So they answered Jesus we do not know and he said to them neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things. And so we're seeing the importance of John the Baptist

as a witness to Jesus. He bears witness to Jesus before Jesus as a forerunner in much the same way as the apostles bear witness to Jesus afterwards.

And the continuity between the ministry of John the Baptist, the witnessing ministry of John the Baptist and the ministry of the apostles of witnessing I've already commented upon. That continuity is very important and so John the Baptist as a witness is one of the reasons why he is baptised. We see why he baptises Jesus.

We see that particularly in John's gospel where he bears witness to what he saw in the baptism of Jesus and so declares this one to be the Lamb of God, the one who's the Son of God, the one who the Spirit has anointed without measure. Jesus comes up out of the water, comes up from the river bank and he's might be worth thinking about the method of John the Baptist here. I think it was most likely Jesus standing maybe up to his waist in the water with water being poured out over his head.

I think that's the most likely method. I think it involves different aspects of symbolism as well. It involves the symbolism of being brought up out of the water, a new creation, but also the blessings of the water from above.

It's those things brought together. Jesus comes up out of the water and the Spirit descends upon him. Note that this is a further aspect of the fulfilling of all righteousness.

Jesus is anointed at this point by the Spirit for his mission. God is anointing and baptising his Son in John's baptism. This baptism of the Spirit is something that the Church will later experience at Pentecost.

There are three aspects of the Father's witness or God's witness to his Son. Here the dove, the heavens opened, the dove descending and the voice declaring. There's also a scriptural voice as the scriptural witness to the one who's about to come is given to us.

There's the prophetic voice of John the Baptist and then there's the heavenly voice of God himself. So much of this is about witness bearing to the true identity of Christ and bringing together those different witnesses is again part of what Matthew is involved in within his gospel. There's an apologetic purpose for all of this.

What is the significance of the dove? The dove connects with the Spirit. It's a physical manifestation of the Spirit descending upon Christ. But think also of what that might remind us of, the Spirit hovering over the original creation.

The Spirit in Genesis chapter 1 verse 2 that leads to this great creation as the land is taken out of the water, as the waters are divided, all these sorts of things. This is the beginning of God's work in creation and there's the beginning of a new creation here as well. God's Spirit descending upon this one ascending out of the water and so the land is coming out of the water.

This first breach of the waters of the deep by the land of a new creation and the Spirit hovers over this one. And so I think Christ is the herald of a new creation in this sense. Think also of Noah, the dove sent out and the dove that comes bearing an olive leaf, an olive branch.

Maybe there's connections with the themes of a branch there. I'm not sure. I would not put much weight upon that.

But the dove descends upon Christ marking him out as one who is going to survive the deluge, as the one who comes up out of the waters, as the one who's the herald of this blessed new creation. There are themes of love there as well. The dove is a messenger of love that comes from eyes in the Song of Songs.

Now Jesus is the beloved son and it's the dove that descends upon him, the symbol of love, the love of the Father for the I think that's part of what's taking place. This is a vision of heaven and earth united. The one coming up out of the deep, the one going out to the land, the voice coming from heaven, heavens themselves opened and something coming down from heaven to a light upon the earth.

This one that's come up from the earth. Jesus, as we see within John's gospel, is Jacob's ladder and this is another symbol of Jacob's ladder, this joining together of heaven and earth, the joining together of the waters below, the joining together of the waters below with the opened heavens above. Think also about some things like the vision of Ezekiel.

Ezekiel, he's about 30 years of age by the banks of the river Chebar with the exiles. He sees heavens opened and visions of God. Something similar is happening here.

Jesus is being prepared for his ministry and there is a similar series of events taking place. Now this is far more clear in Luke where Luke is very explicitly playing upon the imagery of Ezekiel and have spoken upon that elsewhere but these are important things that are more further in the background but they play here as well. The voice declares that this is my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.

There's been debate over what parts of the Old Testament this is drawing upon. I think that there is a good case to be made that it's referring to Psalm 2 verse 7. I will tell of the decree the Lord said to me you are my son today I have begotten you. Ask of me and I will make the nations your heritage and the ends of the earth your possession.

You shall break them with a rod of iron and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel. This is an anointing event and Christ is being anointed and will go out to have conflict with the devil for 40 days and 40 days in the wilderness and then standing against the devil. This is a similar thing to what we see with David.

David is anointed and then he stands against the great champion of the Philistines Goliath who has stood against Israel for 40 days and then he's defeated by David with a

blow to the head. Then there are other passages that people have seen as a background for this not least in chapter 42 of Isaiah. Behold my servant whom I uphold my chosen in whom my soul delights I have put my spirit upon him.

He will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice or make it heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.

He will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth and the coastlands wait for his law. And so I think those two verses both have good claim to be background for what's being discussed or what God is declaring from heaven here.

I think you see these themes being taken up again the themes of Isaiah chapter 42 in Matthew chapter 12. So this is in the background of the Matthewan Christology. These statements are repeated in a slightly different form at the Transfiguration.

Note also that this is a Trinitarian event. Father, Son and Spirit all involved in this event bearing witness to the Son, his true identity, what God has called him to do and he is being set apart for this mission. So this fulfills all righteousness.

It is a means by which God sets the stage. This is the staging ground of a new exodus. The one who's going to lead it has been anointed.

He represents the people. Maybe there are also themes of the day of atonement as after the people have confessed all their sins they are placed upon a representative goat that's sent out into the wilderness. Maybe that is part of what's taking place here.

Sent to Azazel, this lord of the trash heap as it were and Christ with the sins of Israel declared in the baptism of John. Christ is baptized as the culmination of all of that as the representative of this penitent people and then he goes out to the lord of the trash heap as he squares off against Satan in what follows. Maybe that's part of what's taking place here as well.

I don't know. What do you think? Thank you very much for listening. If you have any questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

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It's something that will I hope be a great benefit to many people. Thank you very much for listening. God bless.

See you tomorrow.