

## Series: LMC Young Adults Camp 2025

### As we get going, a story: William Cowper's Grave

William Cowper: brilliant academic and the most famous poet of his time (lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century) - struggled deeply with mental illness (checked into Insane Asylums 4 or 5 times, attempted suicide) - more than anything he struggled with an intense insecurity about his own salvation, he couldn't believe that God loved him - but he never gave up believing the truth of the gospel, even when he couldn't feel it. He became great friends with John Newton, Newton saved him from suicide many times, worked as his pastoral assistant and wrote some of the most beautiful hymns we still sing. "There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel's veins; And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains."

The last five years of his life seemed marked by unremitting spiritual darkness. There was no happy ending, he died in deep spiritual depression.

- the only ground he took was the 6 feet he was buried in
- where is the victory?

**Theme: If you want to know the shape of Jesus' victory start by seeing him dripping wet and divinely beloved.**

### Matthew 3

In chapter 3 we discover that Jesus is now grown up. 20-30 years have passed about which we know nothing. Now we're standing by a river on the historic border of the nation of Israel.

As we look around — survey the scene — I wonder what you notice?

**Discuss: in a small group come up with five things that are strange or striking about these verses (Matthew 3:1-16)**

#### 1. The location is significant.

*In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea —Matthew 3:1*

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. —Matthew 3:13*

The location is the wilderness and the river Jordan. A place on the edge of the historic promised land of Israel. The river was the place where the Israelites had passed from their wandering in the wilderness into a new home. God parted the water so they could walk through the river into the land (see Joshua 3). This is a place of beginnings.

#### 2. John's appearance is significant:

A crazy-looking man known as John the Baptist (the Baptiser) is standing in the water calling out to people to **'Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near'** - 'change your lives because God's rule is about to begin'.

John in indulging in some prophetic cosplay. His costume is directly borrowed from the Old Testament prophet Elijah:

*John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. —Matthew 3:4*

You can check the comparison with Elijah in 2 Kings 1:7-8.

*The king asked them, "What kind of man was it who came to meet you and told you this?"*

*They replied, "He had a garment of hair and had a leather belt around his waist."*

*The king said, "That was Elijah the Tishbite." —2Kings 1:7-8*

Why John dressed like the Prophet Elijah? The answer is found in an Old Testament prophecy that Elijah would one day return to Israel:

*"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction." —Malachi 4:5-6*

Strikingly, these verses are the very end of the Old Testament. The last words before Matthew's Gospel.

John's appearance is significant: it's the costume of a promised messenger. By dressing like Elijah, he is claiming to be the messenger who prepares people for the coming of God's rule.

Matthew quotes what appears to have been widespread opinion about John:

*This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:*

*'A voice of one calling in the wilderness,*

*'Prepare the way for the Lord,*

*make straight paths for him.'* —Matthew 3:3

People believed that John the Baptist was the messenger that God had promised.

John's costume backs it up.

And his message was momentous: God is about to act. Be ready.

### **3. John's baptism is significant.**

How do you get ready? By being **baptised**. It's a ritual practice of washing with water. But the place that John performed these baptisms gave them a whole new meaning. And the place combined with his message and his appearance to tell us a story.

He calls them to repent, to change their ways. And then he baptises them in the Jordan. He gets them to pass through the river again just like the ancient tribes entered the land. John's baptism is an acted out symbol of the message John preached. Israel needs to begin again. Repent, change your ways, begin again, because God's kingdom is close.

Implicit in John's message is the claim that just because you are in the land of Israel doesn't mean you are in God's people. Only those who repent and are baptised, those who go back out... and come back in again through the water, only **they** are really God's people.

This explains John's reaction to the Pharisees and Sadducees. These were significant religious groups in Israel, very different from each other, but John links them together in his condemnation.

7 *But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.*

John condemns them for not truly embracing an attitude of repentance. John does not see any real change in them that would demonstrate that they know they need to begin again with God. Instead he sees complacency, a belief they can rest on being descendants of Abraham (v9). Perhaps it is even worse than this? John addresses these leaders of Israel as a “brood of vipers”—children of the devil, the serpent who deceived Eve—rather than children of Abraham. Israel is ruled by these children of the devil. It is under the dominion of the evil one. When God comes to judge and establish his kingdom, these rulers and their power will be destroyed. Anyone who has not left behind their old life will face this judgement. John baptises in the wilderness, in the Jordan river, because he is symbolising a new Exodus, leaving a land of slavery behind, escaping into the wilderness—like Israel from Egypt, entering into the promised land again—like Israel with Joshua. But notice how the characters in the story have shifted. The leaders of Israel have become wicked like Egypt. The land of Israel is a place that you need to leave in order to come back again. John’s baptism symbolised repentance - turning around and beginning again in preparation for the coming of the King.

#### 4. John’s Message is Urgent

As John cries out, his words hit you with a fierce urgency. In the face of the Pharisees and Sadducees he spits the words: “who warned you to flee from the **coming** wrath?”; the axe is **already** at the root of the tree. John’s warning is extreme: you are in danger of being chopped down and burned up:

*10 every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Three times in three verses John refers to a fire that will sweep through the destroy. A fire that will accompany the one who is coming after John: *he will baptise with the Holy Spirit and fire (v11); the chaff he will burn with fire that never goes out” (v12).*

The image of chaff is of grain husks (chaff) cast away, dust being flung by the wind, the plastic bags strewn in the ragged grass beside the shopping mall carpark. The cigarette butt floating in the drain. The refuse and rubbish disposed of, and never given another thought.

The judgement John is warning about will come on Israel if they do not listen and prepare for God’s coming. This warning was first fulfilled in the destruction that God brought on the nation of Israel after its rejection of Jesus—the destruction of the nation and the Temple in 70AD as predicted by Jesus in Matthew 24. But this little (still catastrophic) judgement in Israel’s history, is an advance glimpse of God’s judgement on the world, the day his verdict is handed down on every human life: my life, your life. The question that God is deciding is: does this person belong in eternity?

Those whom God judges ‘yes’, are gathered together—the wheat gathered into the barn (12). These ones now see that their life-journey has not been a waste because it has brought them into God’s world made new—their life will never now be cut off.

Those whom God judges ‘no’. They are chaff. They will be cleaned from the finished creation like sawdust blown from a carved bowl. They play no more meaningful part in the world.

Let the seriousness of this settle. We are talking about human lives.

A human life can be wasted. Not tragically cut short, not evilly oppressed, just wasted. Cut off from what is needed to flourish, becoming pointless, just a drifting used-up plastic bag

John's call to repent and begin again is set against the urgency and consequences of a future judgement.

John is calling on people to take sides - either with the status quo, or with the new thing that God is about to do. Lots of people are responding. And right at this climactic moment, John shifts the focus off himself.

#### 4. Jesus is greater than John.

*11 "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."*

Then, without a breath to pause comes v13. **Jesus is standing there.**

On the bank.

In the water.

Coming to be baptised. John knows him. He protests: this isn't right. I need to be baptised by you, with the Holy Spirit of God, with fire. I'm just the preparation, you bring the real thing.

This whole chapter focusses on John the Baptist (12 verses on John only 5 involving Jesus) but John is clear that he is the messenger, the signpost, pointing toward **something greater**. In Jesus, something greater has come. The thing that John is preparing people **for**, with urgency, with warnings, is standing there.

In Jesus the Kingdom of God has come.

#### 5. Jesus words are significant

Jesus insists that John baptise him. It's important to wrestle with the question 'why'?

John wrestles with the question. It's a baptism of repentance. It's a baptism for those who are preparing for God's kingdom. Jesus has nothing to repent. Jesus brings the Kingdom. He doesn't need to be baptised. Why does he insist?

Let's listen closely to Jesus' words:

*"Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." —Matthew 3:15*

The little word "fulfil" is the one to pay attention to. It is a word that Matthew has used throughout the account of Jesus' life so far. Jesus is frequently fulfilling the words of the prophets—the OT speakers of God's word. Jesus' fulfils their prophecies—not just in the sense of a prediction coming true—but in the sense of a story coming to its conclusion. When Jesus parents flee from King Herod's murderous plot to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem, they go into Egypt for refuge. Matthew tells us that this happened "so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled: *Out of Egypt I called my Son.*" (Matthew 2:15). The words Matthew quotes are from the prophet Hosea. In Hosea, these words aren't a prediction. They are a description of what God had done for Israel in rescuing them from Egypt with Moses. The point that Matthew is making is that Hosea saw a shape to Israel's story: Out of Egypt. Jesus relives that story, he fulfils its shape and will go on to change its ending.

When Jesus comes to be baptised, he does so to fulfil the shape of a story. To relive the story of his people and their crossing of the Jordan. Jesus is bringing the history of Israel to its proper conclusion. He is linking himself to his people so he can relive their story and change the ending.

Three things happen when Jesus comes back up out of the water that tell us that this is more than just someone reenacting the history of Israel.

What are the three things?

1) Heaven is opened; 2) God's Spirit descends on him and rests on him; and 3) a voice speaks.

**1. Heaven is opened:** In the Bible, when we are told 'the heaven opened' it carries the sense of a hidden truth being revealed. Something significant is about to be revealed. Heaven is the place of God's presence and rule. From the time of Adam and Eve's fall, heaven and earth are separated. This is symbolised in the Temple by the veil that separates the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. But in this moment, that separation is pierced. Heaven and earth are joined again.

**2. God's Spirit descending** reminds Bible readers of the prophecies made about God's promised King. From Isaiah 11

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.  
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—  
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of might,  
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—  
and he will delight in the fear of the LORD. —Isaiah 11:1–3*

From Isaiah 42

*"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations." —Isaiah 42:1*

And this from Psalm 2

*"I will proclaim the LORD'S decree: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have become your father. Ask me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.'" —Psalm 2:7–8*

These prophecies go on to speak about the rule of this Servant King bringing justice and peace and extending over all the world.

But why does the Spirit take the form of a dove? I think there is another rich symbolism here.

- the dove sent out by Noah to look for dry ground, that never returns - as though this dove flies through time and alights on Jesus - the moment of the baptism resonates with the symbolism of the creation - the waters below (the Jordan) receding as Jesus comes up from baptism, the heaven above, the dry land being brought forth from the waters (Jesus), the spirit over the waters - the dove alighting on the dry land - the symbolism of a new creation moment - the earth and humanity renewed like after the time of the flood.

**3. The voice speaking** declares

*"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17 NIV11)*

In the Exodus from Egypt, God had told Pharaoh that Israel was his firstborn son

*Then say to Pharaoh, 'This is what the LORD says: Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my son go, so he may worship me."—Exodus 4:22–23 (see also Hosea 11:1).*

The relationship between God and his people, a relationship that had failed as Israel betrayed God, has now been crystallised and focussed onto one person: Jesus. He is the true 'son of God'. He will relive the story of Israel but change the ending.

But the original Son of God wasn't Israel, it was Adam. You can see this in the genealogy of Jesus given by Luke in chapter 3: *"the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalalel, the son of Kenan, the son of Enosh, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God."* —Luke 3:37–38

You can also see it in the way Adam's family line is described in Genesis 5: *"This is the written account of Adam's family line. When God created mankind, he made them in the likeness of God. He created them male and female and blessed them. And he named them "Mankind" when they were created. When Adam had lived 130 years, he had a son in his own likeness, in his own image; and he named him Seth."* —Genesis 5:1–3

- Adam is created in God's likeness and image; Adam's son is created in Adam's likeness and image

When Jesus is declared by God to be his beloved son, he is stepping into the role of Israel **and** he is stepping into the role of Adam. He is fulfilling their stories, reliving them to change the ending.

The creation symbolism of the water, land, heavens, dove. The naming of Jesus as God's son. All these things link Jesus—not just to the story of Israel—but to the story of humanity. He is reliving the story of humanity, so that he can change the ending.

Of no one else are these things said or done in the moment of baptism. Many others came through the Jordan that day. Only Jesus hears these words. He is unique. But his uniqueness does not separate him from us. He is uniquely one of us. Uniquely able to live our life, live our story. And change the ending.

Now I could go on through the Book of Matthew and show you how this theme gets deepened and enriched.

Jesus the new Moses - giving his people Torah

Jesus the new Solomon - wisdom

- David - the King
- Joshua - delivering from oppression
- Jeremiah - the prophet of the New Covenant

Jesus fulfils all these figures - takes up their story and brings them to completion.

And because each of these figures came to Israel as a representative of God - speaking and ruling in God's place - as Jesus lives their stories, he does so in the person of God, of Yahweh, the saving God of Israel. As he was named in his birth, he is God comes near - Immanuel - God with us.

## **What comes next?**

Now I want you to impress those pictures into your mind, hold them there. And then come to me to the last moments of Jesus' life.

*"At noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"). When some of those standing near heard this, they said, "Listen, he's calling Elijah." Someone ran, filled a sponge with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. "Now leave him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to take him down," he said. With a loud cry, Jesus breathed his last."*  
—Mark 15:33–37

Jesus' death

- under the dark sky of God's anger
- abandoned
- unrescued
- dead

It looks to all the world like the death of another failed revolutionary.

**[Discuss] How does this ending fit with the story that started in Matthew 3?**

It fits like this: This death is not the failure of the journey that began in his baptism.

It is what he chose when he went down into the water.

This is what it means to live the story of the people of God all the way to the bitter end.

As divinely beloved, dripping wet, in his baptism, he chooses this.

It is his victory

- the story of Israel ends like this - the Exile - every one of those people whom Jesus fulfils was rejected - in all of them the people of Israel rejected their God - he came to them again and again - finally they nailed him to a Cross. The story of the people of Israel is the story of God rejected and therefore the nation rejected. Dying abandoned.
- the human story ends like this - the Cross shows us ourselves apart from God - alienated, subject to God's wrath
- your story was going to end like this - this is your life lived to its bitter end - this is the sum total of all your resolutions and efforts to be different. All the ground you could take on your own was a grave.
- But he lived your story, and took your ending.

***Jesus' died forsaken, so that you would never be.***

So if you want to know the shape of the victory, you look at Jesus not at yourself.

The victory is seen not in your resolve to live differently

but in his resolve to change you.

Elisabeth Barrett Browning - another wonderful Christian woman living a generation later, one of the greatest poets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, wrote a poem 'Cowper's Grave'. She was no stranger to depression, to the feeling of forsakenness by God. And she wrestled to express the sense of desolation that Cowper experienced, and the answer that God could give him.

She wrote these words:

Yea, once, Immanuel's orphaned cry his universe hath shaken,—  
It went up **single, echoless**, "My God, I am forsaken!"

It went up from the Holy's lips amid his lost creation.

**That, of the lost, no son should use those words of desolation** [repeat]

**He was forsaken.**

**So you won't ever be.**

My dear friends, I don't know what poison the evil one pours into your ears, that maybe God doesn't love you, that perhaps he has forsaken you, that your sins are too vile. If you are becoming followers of Jesus, if you want to come after him on the mission. Satan will oppose you, and he will oppose you in this way. He will seek to rob you of your assurance that God loves you. He will whisper that you have been forgotten, forsaken. Maybe you've been having those thoughts today. Dear friend, Jesus cry went up **single, echoless** "My God, I am forsaken". It need never come from your lips. It went up from the Holy's lips amid his lost creation. That, of the lost, **no son** should use those words of desolation.

They are not your words. They are his, not yours.

He was forsaken, so you won't ever be.

**And for that reason, his death is his victory.**

**Pray**