



Sunday 25th April, 2021

Matthew 11:2-11 What do you see?

1. Reading:

Matthew 11:2-11

2 When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples 3 to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'

4 Jesus replied, 'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

7 As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. 9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you."

11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

2. Questions:

a. The passage shows that John the Baptist was seeking confirmation about who Jesus was and Ashley explained that this may have been for a number of reasons:

- a. John's difficult and even life-threatening circumstances (in prison) made him re-evaluate.
- b. The apparent lack of fruit of John's labours
- c. Jesus didn't seem to entirely match the kind of messiah John had in mind

In what ways are John's 'wobbles' reflected in our own experience?

b. Ashley quoted from 'Dear England' a book by the Archbishop of York, where love is the litmus test of authentic Christian living. A fine sentiment, surely, but what does this mean in practice. How are our lives founded on love, motivated by love and express love to others?

c. Jesus answers John's disciples with a question (Jesus often answers questions with another question!) He says, 'What do you hear and see?' In other words instead of giving an academic answer Jesus invited them to reflect on what Jesus is doing – that will be sufficient testimony. If we asked our non-Christian friends what they 'heard and saw' in our lives, what do you think they might actually say?

d. Although John was expressing a 'faith-wobble', Jesus was incredibly kind towards him. Jesus commended him, saw him as the fulfilment of OT prophecy and elevated his status. What recent kindness could you testify to as you journey through the difficulties, complications and doubts of life's journey?

3. Prayer:

Thomas Merton

My Lord God,
 I have no idea where I am going.
 I do not see the road ahead of me.
 I cannot know for certain where it will end.
 nor do I really know myself,
 and the fact that I think I am following your will
 does not mean that I am actually doing so.
 But I believe that the desire to please you
 does in fact please you.
 And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
 I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,

though I may know nothing about it.
 Therefore will I trust you always though
 I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
 and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

4. Text of the Sermon:

Matthew 11:2-11 What do you see?

This story is about Jesus and John the Baptist. That's not a description of the church he went to; there's no Philip the Methodist or Bartholomew the Anglican. It's a name given because of what he does. A better title might be John the Baptiser – he preaches and then baptises those who then accept his message.

This episode rests on the fact that John is in prison – put there because he challenged the lifestyle of King Herod. John sends a message to Jesus asking whether he (Jesus) really is the Messiah, or whether it will be someone else. John seems to have some doubts about Jesus, so perhaps he as well as Thomas could be called the 'Doubting' one!

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Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, are written to explain who Jesus is and what he has done.

- Luke's Gospel starts by explaining that it is written for that people might know the truth.
- Mark's Gospel starts by explaining that this is about the good news concerning Jesus.
- And here in Matthew... it says in chapter 3 that John the Baptist recognises Jesus as the Messiah - one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals... You get the idea.
But now John's in prison. And he sends his follows to Jesus to ask, to check out, to confirm that Jesus - he is the Messiah, right? John's having a wobble – a wobble about faith.

Ever had a wobble yourself? Ever wondered – am I really on the right track being a Christian. Is this really true?

Well, looking at this story we can identify some of the reasons that John and we, might have faith wobbles, might reconsider whether this Christian faith is all it claims to be.

One of the reasons John's faith wobbles may be down to a change to his circumstances John is in prison. Life is tough; indeed so tough that John will never leave prison. Under the threat of losing his life, John will soon lose his. It's an enormous psychological and emotional challenge to keep faith when things are so dire.
When life becomes hard, very hard, perhaps even life-threateningly hard – doubts might rise in our hearts and minds – where is my help? This is hardly the glorious life I thought it would be.

We might also add that the fruit the evidence that the life John led before imprisonment seemed to lack much evidence that the life of faith was really working out.

Both John and Jesus had preached their message of repentance and faith. But not many responded and far fewer actually stuck with them. And if John was so right in preaching his message – preparing the way – if this is so right in this, then why on earth is he sitting in prison, awaiting his death?

What evidence is there in our lives that following Jesus is actually delivering the kind of life... well let's say it... the kind of successful, fruitful life we hoped it would?

And lastly – and something which the passage picks up on – are the doubts raised in John's mind as to whether Jesus really was the Messiah.

It seems evident that John's Messiah, the one he had hoped that Jesus would be, was the fiery judge of the book of Isaiah, denouncing the sins of the people.

John had preached that:

Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. In John's mind, Jesus didn't look like that kind of Messiah.

Ever been disappointed with Jesus – or rather disappointed with the kind of Jesus he turns out to be – not fitting our vision of him – our version of him – the version which suffers from being the projection of all the things we would like him to be.

So Jesus doesn't turn out to be the fully inclusive, no questions asked, do as you please Jesus which can be just a projection of our own cultural views. Or Jesus doesn't turn out to be the separating, judging, upholding a set of values that we value, Jesus – which can be... just a projection of the set of cultural values we grew up with.

If Jesus has never upset you, or disappointed you may I suggest that somewhere you may have got Jesus wrong. There's not a shadow of doubt in my mind that the journey of discovering who Jesus really is takes our whole lifetime. It's not a one-off exercise. We repeatedly go on a journey of discovery and learning - and John the Baptist is no different.

I've been reading this book – 'Dear England' by the Archbishop of York – it's a letter to the country about who Jesus is. On this matter of doubt, of questioning whether there is a God, he writes:

P. 52-53.

I think he's probably right. The litmus test, the benchmark for discovering the true Jesus is love. If it's not loving, then it's not true. The kingdom is love and it is built on the love of Jesus.

1 Corinthians 13: If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

In other word, I can be orthodox as orthodox can be, I can be miracle-working, have a brain the size of a planet, faith to believe all things and live a life of stunning generosity – but if I haven't got love – then I am utterly bankrupt and haven't even taken the first step in following Jesus. Love is that big a deal.

But back to the passage.

John's followers go to Jesus and ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?' Jesus' reply is two-fold and is, I think, at the heart of what God wants to say to us today – today with our doubts and uncertainties, today with our indifference and half-heartedness.

1. Firstly Jesus says this:

'Go back and report to John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. 6 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

What do you see? What do you see?

And Jesus lists a number of stark changes which he is bringing into the world. Just as with Old Testament message of Jubilee which upended the old ways and opened up new life for people Jesus says that sight, restoration, healing, resurrection and the raising up of the poor all constitute this new order which Jesus and his disciples are bringing. Look at this and you see what a Messiah really looks like.

This week's news has been full of clashing cultures, clashing ideologies and behaviours which demonstrate opposing ways of operating in the world.

- Ways of dealing with a black man – when you are a police officer.
- Ways of running a football club – when you own it.
- Ways of running the country – when you are Prime Minister – of course we are yet to discover if Boris Johnson actually did anything wrong, legally or morally.

Those who have a stake in the status quo, the existing way in which the world is orientated, those who benefit from how the cards are currently dealt – they will be most riled by Jesus, his actions and message, they will stumble on account of me.

By contract the outsiders, the non-beneficiaries of the system, those who 'take no offence' at Jesus – they will rejoice in the message which John & Jesus bring.

So when asked if he really was the Messiah, Jesus points John to the evidence that anyone could see; the ways in which the world order was being challenged, how the status quo was being upturned and subverted.

2. And secondly, what Jesus also does for 'Doubting John', is to remind him who he really is.

... Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: 'What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? 8 If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. 9 Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written:

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Jesus picks up on the crazy appearance and words of John the Baptist – a man who *looked like yesterday and spoke like tomorrow*.

Jesus quotes the Old Testament scripture from Malachi and makes the link to John!

John the Baptist - he's that bloke you read about in the Bible. He is the messenger, he is preparing the way and his status is high and protected.

What a response! What a remarkable affirmation!

While John is having his own private wobble of faith, as doubts creep in on him – Jesus replies by utterly affirming the rightness of his message and his place in what God is doing.

SLOW

I think God wants to affirm you, us this morning. We wobble, we have doubts caused by circumstances, a lack of progress and by the fact that Jesus doesn't fit our preferred version of what he should look like.

He invites us to look and see a kingdom coming which is defined and described by love.

Love never gives up.

Love cares more for others than for self.

Love doesn't want what it doesn't have.

Love doesn't strut,

Doesn't have a swelled head,

Doesn't force itself on others,

Isn't always "me first,"

Doesn't fly off the handle,

Doesn't keep score of the sins of others,

Doesn't revel when others grovel,

Takes pleasure in the flowering of truth,

Puts up with anything,

Trusts God always,

Always looks for the best,

Never looks back,

But keeps going to the end.

And just as Jesus did with John – Jesus reminds us today who we are – we may not be much to look at, may not have much kudos according to the world's standards, but we have been written into this great story and our lives count for much in this kingdom which is coming.