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Sermon

Questioning Jesus

Matthew 11:2-11

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John was in jail. He strongly needed to know the answer to his question – perhaps his faith in Jesus was hanging on the answer. There he was in a dungeon, having been thrown there because of a woman's spite and a drunken King's foolish promise. Why had Jesus not miraculously sprung him out of prison? John would have every right to expect that of the Messiah, but Jesus did not do it.

He and Jesus had grown up knowing each other. They were cousins. Somewhere along the line, though, things had changed between them. They had both had unusual and significant supernatural signs marking them out as being specially chosen, but John was the first of the two young men to be given a nudge by God to go out into the desert and preach. Then at Jesus' baptism, John realised beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was the promised Messiah – "the Lamb of God". God proved it to John by a convincing sign. Doves don't normally flutter down and land on people, but God had told John it would happen and then he saw it with his own eyes.

John had gone out in the desert to preach repentance, just as the prophets of old had done. Malachi had been the last prophet before the 400-year silence of God. I am sure the Jews would have pored over what Malachi had to say – perhaps these were the last words of God to his people? But no, they pointed to someone: Malachi 3:1 says "See, I will send a messenger who will prepare the way before me."

In a similar way, before the Queen goes anywhere on an important visit, I bet there is someone who goes ahead and checks that all is in order for her, so that there are no embarrassing glitches or hold-ups.

Now John knew as did every other Jewish man, that Isaiah was referring to the Messiah when he talked about someone who would "open eyes that are blind, free captives from prison and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness."

So that might be behind John the Baptist's anxious questioning: "Have I made a mistake? Is Jesus really who I thought he was?" That question comes to us sometimes, particularly when we strike difficulties in our lives. Jesus helps us answer that question for ourselves by asking three questions about why the crowds went out to see John.

First he says, "Who did you go out to see? A reed swayed by the wind?" If you think about it, the answer is obvious. John was not a weak, vacillating man. He was in prison because he strongly stood up for what he knew to be true and wasn't afraid to let people know about it. Also, a reed swayed by the wind would be a

pretty normal thing, not something you would go out of your way to see – this was an important, life-changing message that people went out of their way to hear.

Second, did you go to see “A man dressed in fine clothes?” No, again, obviously – John was not interested in the latest fashions and he was not caught up with material things – he lived very simply in keeping with his call to repentance and his message was about an awesome change in the supernatural realm that affects everyone - you and me included.

Thirdly, Jesus said they went to see a prophet. No prophet had come for 4 centuries. Now God was speaking again. That is partly why they went.

But Jesus said, “John the Baptist was greatest among those born of a woman up til that time. You went to see a prophet, *yet more than a prophet.*”¹ There had been lots of prophets in Israel’s history, but John was different and more important because of the message he carried.

That means John was a prophet, but he was also symbolic of the huge shift that was happening around that time. The shift was the inbreaking of the Kingdom of God into our earthly realm.

A prophet is someone who takes the words of God to the people – a messenger if you will. Now with messengers, their importance is not who they are, but the importance of the message which they carry. The message that John the Baptist carried was not just a bit of local gossip. His ground-breaking news was the coming of God to remove the barrier, that sin-barrier, which had been between God and man for so long.

This news was so important that it affected not just his hearers, but every generation since and affects us today. For with the breaking down of the barrier of sin between us and God, we get to be born again into a new Kingdom. Living in a new Kingdom, means that we serve King Jesus, not the prince of darkness.

The interesting thing is that Jesus says that even the least of the people in the new kingdom is greater than this very important man called John. That means you and you and you. If you are born again, you are greater than John was.

Why are you greater than John was? Well, his message was the arrival of a new kingdom which we have come into. That’s good news and good news needs to be shared. We as message-bearers, get to tell people about how we got into the new kingdom and how they can too. Not only that, but we can tell them what it is like to live in this new kingdom, what sort of things are different from the old kingdom.

A simple way to share with people is telling them about any answer we have had when we prayed. Don’t worry about whether they might scoff and say, “Oh, that was just a co-incidence!” I am sure you have heard about the time when Bishop William Temple famously said “When I pray, coincidences happen. When I don’t pray, they don’t happen. So I am going to keep on praying.”

When we pray, we are inviting God to be the King, to let his Kingdom come in the situation. Sometimes the answer will be different from what we expected – he may answer in a totally different way than we could have imagined. Two things: first – He is the King, not us and secondly, there may be more things wrapped around the situation in the spiritual realm than we are aware of. In prayer, we can ask God what is wrapped around the situation and pray for his kingdom to affect those things as well as what we can see. We do that every Sunday as we pray 3 short words: “Your Kingdom come.” It means “Lord, let your good kingdom of righteousness, joy and peace come in the things I am concerned about.”

If you want to read a really good book on prayer, try “When God Answers Prayer” by Bob Russell. It’s small, not too expensive, and very good value.

This passage is a crucial time for Jesus. John is questioning if Jesus really is the Messiah. If the crowds follow John into doubt, they will walk away from Jesus and his mission will come crumbling down before it even took off. It all hinges on their answer to these three questions? Who is John? If he is a prophet, his pointing to Jesus as the lamb of God is true and people will therefore believe in and follow Jesus.

¹ In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son,” Hebrews 11:1&2a

So who do you say that he is? Is he a wise person who represented God to us? A kind, nice young man in a white robe who has entertainment value but really, nothing practical to do with my daily life, nothing that would change what I want to do.

Exactly who is Jesus? The answer to that question often comes by revelation. If you are not sure of the answer, a useful question is “God, would you reveal to me who you are?”

It would be really good to get the answer established before Jesus “comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead.”

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