



Sermon
6th July, 2014

The Privilege and Responsibility of Revelation

Matthew 11:16-30; Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25a

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Last week, I spoke about our being representatives of Christ. I said we have a great privilege in that service, but also a great responsibility. As we continue with Matthew's gospel, again those words privilege and responsibility apply.

As always, we need to consider the passage in its context: Jesus sent the apostles out on their first ministry tour and continued with his own preaching tour as recorded at the beginning of chapter 11.

A delegation from John the Baptist came to ask Jesus a question. John was languishing in prison having offended Herod by his straight talk and now he wondered if he had been mistaken in proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus sent a message back to John citing the evidence of his miracles:

Matthew 11:5 "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor."

These are the actions Isaiah had prophesied of the Messiah.¹ John would recognise the claim, "These miracles are the proof I am the Messiah just as was revealed to you." These actions were the evidence he needed to back up the revelation he had received.

Jesus then turned to address the doubts of the crowd about John the Baptist. If he were a prophet of God, why is he imprisoned? Jesus gave a stirring speech of support for John, validating his calling and ministry. And so into today's passage.

Jesus starts by exposing the contrariness of the people who criticise John for being too austere and Jesus for being too relaxed. Neither can satisfy the fickle whim of the people – or is it that both must be criticised to deflect the demands of their teaching from the hearers? It is easier to criticise the speaker than take his words to heart.

Both John and Jesus called the people to repent and that is never a welcome message. The flesh, our natural unredeemed self hates it and struggles to avoid it – easier by far to find fault with the speaker and so escape his words.

How often do we do that? How often do we shut our ears to unbearable, but true, words and refuse to allow them into ourselves – and refuse to change?

Jesus continued with a severe warning to those towns which had experienced his presence and his miraculous ministry but had hardened their hearts and refused to repent, refused to believe.

Difference between doubt and unbelief.

Let's address this matter of doubt and unbelief - is there a difference?

¹ Isaiah 29:18, 35:5-6, 53:4-5, 61:1

John the Baptist had received some profound revelations from God about the coming Messiah. He had seen the Spirit descend upon Jesus and remain on him; he had publicly announced that Jesus was the Lamb of God. Yet, Jesus was not doing what he thought the Messiah would do. He had not raised an army and evicted the Romans. He had not fulfilled the popular expectation of the Messiah. So John, in the misery of his imprisonment, doubted.

It is good that he asked Jesus about it. Rather than progressing into unbelief, he chooses to ask Jesus. That is a good thing for us to do too. When we are perplexed, it is good to talk to God about it. Bring the question, the frustration, the disappointment to him, rather than complaining about God to yourself or others. When we talk to him about it and trust him to answer, it is amazing how revelation or resolution comes.

Jesus does not condemn John. He gives him an answer and an encouragement. Yes, I am the Messiah but the timing is not as you thought. If you hold onto your faith in me you will be blessed.

That tells me that honest doubt is not a show-stopper for God. Consider this: Matthew records that after the resurrection,

“The eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted.”²

These are the eleven remaining apostles. They know he was crucified and dead; they see him standing before them talking to them and some doubted! How could you doubt when listening to someone you know who well? Their natural minds were overwhelmed by the immensity of the resurrection and they doubted or were of two minds – they needed to come to terms with this extraordinary event. However, Jesus continues with the great commission regardless.

I remember being at a Harry Greenwood meeting in the early 1980s when he prayed for a man’s leg to be lengthened. He invited those who had never seen a miracle to come forward and watch carefully. A doctor friend of mine sat in the chair behind the man and put his hands on the man’s hips to make sure there was no pelvic movement. We watched as Mr Greenwood prayed and one leg which had been shorter became longer until they were both the same length. Afterwards, he no longer walked with a limp. The mind rebels at that. I remember thinking, “I know my eyes just saw that but it cannot be so. But it is!” It takes repeated experiences to open our minds to new possibilities as we see God at work.

Honest doubt is OK and Jesus will deal with it. What is not alright is unbelief. This is the sin of the cities he warns. They had the privilege of experiencing God incarnate living among them and they chose not to believe. They saw his miracles and they hardened their hearts against him.

He warns that in the judgement pagan, Baal-worshipping cities like Tyre and Sidon will be judged more lightly than these Jewish towns who had the experience of Christ and rejected it. That was a shocking statement for Jews to hear. Were they not faithful to the traditions of their forefathers? Maybe, but they rejected the presence of Eternal Life Himself and would not allow even miracles to penetrate their hearts.

Capernaum, where he lived for an extended period, would be judged more severely. Luke says in a not dissimilar context, “...from everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded...”³ They had a great privilege in experiencing Jesus’ ministry but there was a great responsibility linked to it.

So strongly did Jesus put this that he compared the judgement of Capernaum with Sodom’s. He said the people of Sodom would have repented had they seen the miracles which Capernaum saw. Therefore the judgement of Capernaum will be the more severe.

² Matthew 28:16-17

³ Luke 12:48

Why do these subjects come up now? It seems that as Jesus' ministry and fame were growing so was the opposition. The next chapter will take us into the strengthening official resistance to him with the resolution to kill him.

However, for now, warning has been given and the tone changes as we hear a prayer of Jesus to the Father. I wondered why it changed but reference to Luke told me. In his account, Jesus sent out first the twelve and then a further 72. He recounts the warning of the judgement of these unrepentant cities in the commissioning of the seventy-two.⁴

(This is not a contradiction, most preachers give the same message many times in different settings and to different groups of people – it would be entirely to be expected that Jesus would reuse ideas and examples he had already given elsewhere as he travelled about.)

So with the disciples returning from their mission, as he hears of God using them effectively, he rejoices in the same words we hear here in Matthew. He rejoices because his disciples have believed and acted on his teaching. They have gone out, worked miracles and cast out demons. They are the plain and simple people but it is they who trust him rather than the educated leaders.

We have great privilege in relating to the Father through Jesus the Son. We have great privileges of having some opportunities to see the Holy Spirit working miracles amongst us. Let us be careful to match the privilege with the responsibility to respond in faith, to believe and trust in him.

He makes it clear that the only way to know, to have intimate relationship with Father God is through the Son. When Jesus reveals the Father to us, then we can know him too. It is in our relationship with Jesus that we gain relationship with the Father. Don't think that coming to church of itself gives you a true experience of Christianity. It is all about relationship. Only as we repent, as we invite surrender to Jesus so he rules our lives, only when we depend on him to give a new life can we know him and Father God.

That being so we ought to be glad to hear the following words, "Come to me, all you ..." Here is an invitation to find rest, to learn his ways and embrace a new life.

It is the answer to the dilemma the Apostle Paul describes in the Epistle. Paul describes the human condition subject to sin, longing to follow God truly and with purity yet bound by the sinfulness of our nature. Who will deliver him from this bondage? Who will deliver us from the body of death? Then he gives the answer, Jesus Christ our Lord. He is the one who says, "Come to me all you who are heavy laden and I will refresh you. Take my yoke upon you and you will find rest for your souls." Thanks be to God, indeed!

The yoke was a term for a rabbi's teaching. When Jesus assigns a burden to us it is light. How many fathers have shared a load with a young son, by carrying the beam nearer the centre so they take more load, while the boy exalts in being able to help Daddy? In the same way, we may not be aware of it, but he disposes matters so he carries the greater load.

Jesus says he is gentle and humble in heart – just as the reading we heard from Zechariah told of the Messiah being righteous, gentle and having salvation. Jesus speaks of finding rest for your souls – itself a reference to Jeremiah 6:16,

"Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls."

How many of us long for rest? I don't mean an afternoon kip; but a relief from deep weariness and stress. Jesus knows and offers his discipline. He knows about the need for rest – it was God himself who declared the need for a rest day each week. Mark's record of the same event, the return of the disciples from their ministry tour reads:

Mark 6:30-32 The apostles gathered round Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught.
³¹ Then, because so many people were coming and going that they did not even have a chance to

⁴ Luke 10:8-15

eat, he said to them, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest." ³² So they went away by themselves in a boat to a solitary place.

It is not just rest, it is going aside with Jesus and learning of him, being schooled by him. Perhaps you need to take some time like that. Go aside for a day, without tasks to do, without oughts and shoulds and rest with him. Following Jeremiah's advice, Ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way. (Now who said, "I am the Way"?) So walk in that way, walk with Jesus and he promises rest for your souls.

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