



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Blessed is the One who is not Offended

Matthew 11:2-11; Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5:7-10

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In the latter two weeks of Advent, our gaze is directed to the first coming of Christ. This week to the ministry of the herald, John the Baptist; next week back a bit to the birth story.

Looking to this announcement of Jesus' ministry, we have skipped over the birth and 30 more years to his arrival on the public scene ready to do his work. Jesus is 30, John the Baptist is 6 months older. John has proclaimed that the Messiah is coming as we heard last week. His ministry was to call people back into alignment with God's ways to make hearts ready to hear and receive the message from Jesus.

But the local ruler, Herod Antipas had taken his brother's wife for himself and they were living in adultery - John had challenged their behaviour. The result? He was cast into prison to shut him up.

John seems to have expected Jesus to be another Elijah. Elijah called down fire on the pagan priests of Baal. Elijah defied the King and Queen of his day. Surely, if the Messiah was going to set them free and set up his righteous rule, he would act as powerfully as Elijah had done.

So, a delegation from John the Baptist went to ask Jesus the question, "Are you the Messiah?" Jesus sent a message back to John citing the evidence of his miracles:

"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."

This is code language - these are the actions Isaiah had said the Messiah would do.¹ Jesus knew that John would understand the meaning of the report: messianic deeds were happening because the Messiah was here and at work. "Dear John, Doubt no longer! Love Jesus."

John must have wondered what would happen to him and how long would he be stuck there. His contemporary James would say, be patient – the Lord has his plans and his time. You've sown the seed of the message you delivered – it takes time for a crop to grow. You too, be patient and stand firm.

That is a word to all of us. Be patient. God knows what he is doing – even if you don't know what he is doing or sometimes what you are doing! Good things take time to develop. Crops ripen slowly. Farmers have to wait half a year for the harvest. Life has its trials. James says be patient and don't grumble against each other.

¹ Isaiah 29:18, 35:5-6, 53:4-5, 61:1

God may be taking time but he is standing at the door! If you know that, won't you be careful how you speak and act?

So learn patience under suffering from the example of the prophets.

Do you note the final part of Jesus' message back to John? "Blessed is the one who is not offended by me." [ESV]

This is a hard message for John: he knew that it was written that the Messiah would set captives free and he was a captive! How easy to be offended. How easy for John to form a grudge in his heart. But Jesus says he will be blessed if he does not take offence. It is a warning and an encouragement. That message acknowledges it is hard – but there is still a good future – a blessedness. Yes, we know that John would be executed in that prison cell but Jesus knew there was a greater future for him in glory.

Difference between doubt and unbelief.

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

John the Baptist had received some profound revelations from God about the coming Messiah. He had heard God tell him that the one on whom he saw the Spirit descend and remain was the Messiah. That had happened and he had 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 moving into unbelief, he chose 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.

That was the big difference between Job and his friends. The friends talked about God; Job talked to God. In the end, God answered Job with revelation of himself which overwhelmed and satisfied Job.

Job 42:5-6 "My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."

It is also a helpful tip, to thank God for what he has done, rather than complain about what he hasn't done – yet. We all routinely forget that God is infinite and we are finite.

Isaiah 55:8-9 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

It really isn't surprising then, if our ideas about how things should be do not line up with his ideas. We have so blinkered a view, so selfish, so limited – while he is taking in account every person and the effects beyond the immediate time.

But he goes on to say:

Isaiah 55:10-11 As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

When we seek God in our trials, it is his word to us that brings life. So it is with Jesus and John. John asked his question and Jesus did not condemn; he gave an answer and an encouragement. Yes, I am the Messiah but things are 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 example: 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? Is it that their natural minds boggled at the immensity of the resurrection? Is it that they were in two minds as they struggled to come to terms with this extraordinary event? However, Jesus commissions them everyone, doubts and all!

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 alright; Jesus will deal with it. However, refusal to believe is a different matter altogether.

To return to the Gospel passage, as the messengers headed back to John, Jesus spoke to the crowd about him. He reminded them that they went out to the wilderness to hear John. They disrupted their lives and travelled. Was that to see a reed swayed by the wind? Not! – John had backbone and spoke out courageously. Interestingly, the symbol Herod used for himself on the coins was a reed. Was John like Herod? No!

Was it to see a man dressed in fine clothes? No! People in fine clothes live in kings’ houses. John might then be living in a king’s dungeon but he was no courier - he was a man who lived a life in keeping with his message.

So who did they go to see in the wilderness? A prophet; the first for 400 years; one who had been prophesied to come.

John may have felt Jesus should act more like Elijah of old, but Jesus says of John that he is the fulfilment of the promise that one in the spirit of Elijah would come before the Messiah.

In fact, Jesus said, he is the greatest of all those born naturally so far. Even so, the least in the Kingdom of Heaven is greater than John.

The issue is being “in the Kingdom.” Although John had the important role of announcing the Messiah, this did not make him special in the Kingdom, because that placement is dependent on the work of the Son of Man. When we are born again we are grafted into God’s family; we are made co-heirs with Christ in His kingdom – that is the greater honour.

If we are in Christ, we have that honour. So whatever difficulties we may face, we need to be patient. We need to turn towards God not away. We need to talk to our Father in heaven about what is happening. And we do well to thank him for what he has done already.

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² Matthew 28:16-17