

Matthew 11. 1-19. Bethesda. 9 March 2008.

On the face of it, our passage this evening is largely concerned with John the Baptist. But, as we will discover, it really has as much, if not more, to tell us about our Lord Jesus.

In the earlier chapters, Matthew has carefully presented the credentials of Jesus as the King – in relationship to His birth, His baptism, His temptation, His teaching, and His power and authority. The people of Israel have now heard the message of the coming kingdom from John the Baptist, from the King Himself, and, more recently, from His disciples.¹ The time has come for them to make their decision – to accept or to reject Him as their awaited Messiah.

Our chapter is the first of three, Matthew 11, 12 and 13, which record the rising tide of disappointment and of opposition to the kingdom – for our Lord was not turning out to be the kind of Messiah that the people expected or wanted. As we will see, even John the Baptist was having his doubts – and, as the later part of our chapter shows, even the Galilean cities where our Lord performed most of His miracles had rejected His claims, and refused to repent.

‘When John heard in prison about the works of the Christ, he sent by his disciples and said to him, ‘Are you the Coming One, or should we look for another?’

According to chapter 4, John had been shut up in prison very soon after the commencement of our Lord’s public ministry.² He had been imprisoned by Herod Antipas, who was one of the many sons of Herod the Great, and who ruled over Galilee and Perea as Tetrarch for some 40 years. John’s ‘crime’ was that, along with rebuking Antipas for many of his other evils³, he had courageously denounced the marriage of Antipas to one Herodias, as contrary to God’s law, Matt. 14. 3-5. The problem seems to be that Herodias had previously been married to Philip, Antipas’ half-brother – and for Antipas to take her as his wife was a blatant disregard for the law of God which forbade such a relationship, Lev. 18. 16; 20. 21.⁴

Herodias in particular deeply resented John’s condemnation of her marriage, and, for his trouble, John was locked away, according to the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus, in the gloomy fortress of Machaerus, located about five miles east of the Dead Sea.⁵

By the time we reach the events of our chapter, John had been cooped up in prison for several months, during the early part of our Lord’s ministry in Galilee.⁶ And this imprisonment must have proved particularly irksome to a young man of 30 years or so of age, as John was, who had been accustomed to the freedom and open life of the wilderness, Luke 1. 80.

Antipas, we are told, ‘feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man ...he kept him safe ... and he heard him gladly’, Mark 6. 20. And Antipas had granted John one boon at least – that of having his disciples visit him. And it was there, ***‘in prison’***, that John heard from them⁷ about Jesus’ Galilean ministry – about ‘the works of the Christ’, as Matthew reported them.⁸

But to John that raised the big question. Were they *really* the works of ‘the Christ’. Were they really the works of the Messiah?

We know from the parallel account in Luke’s gospel that one of the ‘works’ of which John heard was that of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain. Luke 7. 15-18 informs us, ‘he who was dead sat up and began to speak ... Then fear came upon all, and they glorified God, saying, A great prophet has risen up among us ... And this report about Him (Jesus, that is) went throughout all Judea and all the surrounding region. Then the disciples of John reported to him concerning all these things’.

Clearly this report about Jesus radiated from the area of Nain as far as Machaerus in Perea. Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, had earlier reasoned, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him’, John 3. 2. And John, as others, had no doubt that Jesus was, at the least, a ‘great prophet’ – and had every confidence that He would answer him truthfully. But was He the Christ?

John’s problem was very simple. His preaching in the Jordan valley had pointed to One who would come, not only in blessing, but in judgment. John had announced, ‘I baptize you with water ... but He who is coming after me ... will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire’.⁹

And though He – the Lord Jesus – had brought *healing and help* to many, He had brought *judgement* to none—even to those who had unjustly cast the Baptist into prison.

We have to sympathize with John – a man of the desert, now confined to a prison – a man with a divine commission to preach, now with his voice silenced – a man who had announced judgement, but who could see no trace of any.

Yes, Jesus had begun His ministry, but from the reports which reached John in prison, it bore little resemblance to the ministry of judgement which John had foretold. Seemingly, Jesus had no intention of asserting His authority and judging the degenerate people, as John had thought He would.

And matters were made even worse for John because he was very familiar with the closing chapters of Isaiah, from which he had obtained his marching orders from God – and which spoke of his role as the great forerunner of the Messiah. For, when the priests and Levites from Jerusalem had once asked him, Who are you?, he had answered, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord, as the prophet Isaiah said', John 1. 23.¹⁰

But, in that very section of his book, Isaiah had prophesied plainly that Messiah, when He came, would 'proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound', Isa. 61. 1. Yet John had experienced no such deliverance and release. But why should the King's herald and ambassador languish in prison if the King had really come? And yet Jesus didn't come to deliver him! And the days had become weeks, and the weeks months ... long, weary months.

And it was this which caused John to have second thoughts about Jesus. And so John sent two of his disciples to Him, Luke 7. 18.

'Are you the Coming One, or should we look for another?' John wanted to know – 'the Coming One' being a common term for the Messiah.¹¹

Once John had announced, 'This is He' – 'This is he of whom I said, 'After me comes a man who ranks before me, for He was before me', John 1. 30 – but now John was no longer sure, and so it is not, 'This is He', but 'Are you He?'

It may strike us as rather surprising that Jesus did not simply send back the message, 'Yes, I am the one who was to come; there is no need to look for anyone else'. And such a direct answer would have been entirely consistent with his responses to others. For example, to the woman of Samaria, He said, 'I that speak to you am He' ... to the man who had been born blind, He said, 'You have both seen him, and he it is that speaks with you' ... and to the high priest, He said, 'I am [the Christ, the Son of the Blessed]', Mark 14. 61-62.

But, had Jesus answered in such a way, John may have been left wondering whether perhaps He, the Lord Jesus, was mistaken.

Luke tells us that John's messengers arrived when the Lord was actually performing miracles. '*That very hour* He cured many of diseases and plagues ... and to many blind He gave sight', Luke 7. 21. And we know from Matthew that John's disciples came to Jesus in that region where 'very many of His mighty works were done', Matt. 11. 20.

When our Lord judged that John's disciples had heard and seen enough for His purpose, He sent them to report back to John.

John had, of course, previously heard of Jesus' miracles from his disciples, and, in one sense, the Lord Jesus now told him nothing new. But the Lord deliberately provided John with a summary of His mighty works in terms which would remind John of the very language which Isaiah the prophet had used concerning the Messiah – weaving together several verses from chapters 29, 35 and 61 of Isaiah's prophecy – all of which had now received their clear and visible fulfillment.

And I note that He closed with '**the poor have good news preached to them**'. I guess that such words may have seemed something of an anti-climax, especially following His reference to the dead being raised to life. But then these words are taken from the very same passage in Isaiah which, in all likelihood, caused John some of his trouble – namely, the reference to 'proclaiming liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound'.

And it is interesting that each of the passages from Isaiah to which Jesus referred John make some reference to coming judgement in their immediate context. For example, from chapter 29, 'The scornful one is consumed, and all who watch for iniquity are cut off', v. 20; from chapter 35, 'Behold your God! He will come with vengeance, with the recompense of God!', v. 4; and from chapter 61, 'the day of vengeance of our God', v. 2.

And in this way Jesus assured John that He was indeed the Coming One, and that He would indeed fulfil these prophecies of judgement – if not at that time then one day.

For John's expectations about the Messiah's role were right. The Messiah would baptize in fire and judge the world with justice. But John needed to understand that the Lord Jesus had another mission to fulfil before that could ever happen.

Indeed, our Lord's reply leans in part on the passage He had read from Isaiah the prophet when He first introduced himself as the promised Messiah in the synagogue in Nazareth – which passage opened with His proclamation of good news to the poor. On that occasion He had concluded his reading in mid-sentence with the words, '...to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' ... not going on to complete the statement in Isaiah, 'and the day of vengeance of our God' – which words foretold judgement on those who refused to receive that favour.

Make no mistake, there *is* a judgement day to come, but in the meantime – praise God – it is the time 'of the Lord's favour'.

While Jesus is in Isaiah, he reminded John, from Isaiah 8. 13-15, that God spoke of Himself as a stumbling stone to those in Israel and Judah who did not put their trust in Him. And by applying these words to Himself, Jesus deliberately identified Himself with the Lord of Hosts of that passage!¹²

'As they' – John's disciples – '**departed**'. Our Lord certainly didn't waste any time in putting the record straight and in safeguarding John's reputation.

And so, if John had enquired as to what he should think of the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus made it very clear to the crowds what He thought of John. John had once borne witness to Him, and now He bears witness to John – vindicating John fully and publicly. And that, I note, not when John, strong in his faith, was testifying of Jesus, but when John's faith had almost failed him.

Our Lord's rhetorical questions were His way of eliminating obviously false and inadequate answers in order to underscore the truth about John.

Was John fickle and undependable? For this might have been the impression given to some by John's question. After all, John had once testified plainly to Jesus as the Messiah, and on the ground of John's testimony, some of his own disciples had left him and had followed Jesus. And now here was John seemingly doubting his own testimony. Was he then like a reed, a man easily swayed by the wind of public opinion or official authority.

No way, Jesus would say – this is the man who declared the message of God without fear or favour – to peasant and prince – to tax-collector and tetrarch!

But if John wasn't *fickle*, neither was he *feeble*.

When Jesus asked the crowds if they went out to the wilderness to see '**a man dressed in soft clothing**' they may well have roared with laughter, remembering John's rough coat of camel's hair. No, Jesus said, according to Luke's account, if you want to meet people who wear splendid, gorgeous clothes and who live in luxury, Luke 7. 25 – if you want to meet those who feed on richer fare than John's diet of locusts and wild honey – you will have to visit the courts of kings—and John wasn't to be found in *the royal palace*, Luke 7. 25, but in *the royal prison*!

A prophet then? Yes, John was indeed the first prophet to be sent by God in four hundred years. But he was so much more. For he was not only God's spokesman – as had been the earlier prophets of Israel – but he was himself also the subject and the fulfilment of prophecy – for he was the predicted forerunner of the Messiah – the one foretold to pave the way for His coming.

'**Among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist**'. Beyond dispute, on any reckoning John was a great man. His life was simple, unselfish, and devoted. He showed fearless courage in thundering against the evils of all classes of society – ready, if it came to it, to denounce wickedness in the palace. John had created a veritable spiritual tsunami which was felt way beyond the borders of Palestine.

But Jesus made it clear that John was greater than any man who had ever lived because – and only because – he had the honour of being the one sent to prepare the way of the Lord – that is, the way of the Lord Jesus. And in that our Lord didn't hesitate to apply to Himself a prophecy which referred originally to the coming of God, the greatness of John only served to stress the greatness of Jesus.¹³

But, as Jesus also made clear, for all John's greatness, he did not form part of the kingdom which He – our Lord – had come to proclaim and establish. And, just as Moses had been permitted only to view the Promised Land but not to enter it, so John, as our Lord's forerunner, stood on the threshold of a kingdom he had not entered.¹⁴

And the one who is least in that kingdom is greater than John in the sense – and in the sense only – that he is more highly privileged than John ever was. For John was not a partaker in that kingdom. Nor would he live to see Calvary or experience Pentecost.

John had been, we are told, 'filled with the Holy Spirit from birth', Luke 1. 15, but the least believer today is indwelt by the Holy Spirit. John was able to point Jesus out as the Lamb of God, but John never lived to preach full forgiveness, redemption and cleansing through Jesus' blood.

And the least *heir* of that kingdom is higher by far in spiritual privilege than the *herald* of that kingdom.

'From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence and the violent seize on it'.

Well, I certainly have no right to be dogmatic about the meaning of our Lord's words. I can only give you my opinion for what it is worth. I understand the Saviour to refer in the first instance to the violent antagonism which the work and kingdom of God had already aroused in His day.

And I note that our chapter stands at the point where the opposition to Jesus, His ministry and His followers is starting to bite. You may remember that Jesus has spoken of it to His disciples in the previous chapter – and it will reach fever pitch in the next chapter, with the accusation leveled at Him that He was in collusion – in league – with Beelzebul – the ruler of the demons – with Satan himself.

This opposition was rising and would get far worse – culminating, of course, in His rejection and crucifixion.

In such an environment, if I understand Jesus correctly, entry to His kingdom was not for the fainthearted. And anyone who sought entry would need to force his way through much opposition – he would need to press his way in and to 'seize on it' as bandits would seize on their prey. As our Lord said in another place, 'The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and every one enters into it violently'¹⁵ – enters with the same force and strenuous effort, that is, with which others oppose that kingdom.

Revolutionaries in Israel, such as those known as Zealots, wanted to introduce God's kingdom by military force. And Jesus was perhaps referring to their zeal in a figurative way to express the single-minded commitment necessary to enter God's kingdom. Certainly, according to our Lord, entry to that kingdom demanded resolve and determination.¹⁶

The age of the law and the prophets had come to a conclusion with John – who had been privileged to announce the promised Messiah – and to see Him for himself — and whose ministry marked the climax, not only of Old Testament prophecy, but of the Law also, which had prophesied through its institutions, its ritual, and its sacrifices. For there was no need of types now that our Lord Jesus, the great antitype, had appeared.¹⁷

In our final section – verses 16-19 – we note our Lord's words, '***to what shall I liken this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to the other children***'. That is, He didn't speak of John and Himself as lamenting the lack of response to their preaching. The point is not what John and Jesus were saying about their generation, but what their generation were saying about John and Jesus.

And the Lord compares Israel's unbelief to that of children playing weddings and funerals in the marketplace – to children who show themselves impossible to please.

There is, of course, a whole world of difference between being *childish* and being *childlike*. While condemning the *first* here, at the beginning of chapter 18 Jesus requires the *second* for entrance to God's kingdom; 'I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children (humble and trustful), you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven', Matt. 18. 3.

But neither John nor Jesus were acceptable to their generation, or satisfied their demands.

John was austere – standing apart from the normal joys of life. And, by and large, the people and their leaders dismissed him as a fanatic, branding him as a man possessed.¹⁸

Jesus did not conform to the rules of their oral tradition – which governed not only *what* and *how* you should eat, but *with whom*. He accepted invitations to meals, even when it was clear that tax-collectors and sinners would be eating with him, Matt. 11. 19. '***A friend***¹⁹ ***of tax-collectors and sinners***', they said. And so He was – for which such as Zacchaeus will be eternally grateful, Luke 19. 7. And well did we sing John Newton's lines, 'One there is above all others, well deserves the name of friend ... which of all our friends, to save us could, or would, have shed his blood?' But the religious leaders of our Lord's day dismissed Him as an impious man.²⁰

It was, I think, as if they were saying, 'We have looked for great Messianic glory and national joy, but you, John, have not responded – all you do is gloomily call on us for repentance – 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance'. And then we have looked for deliverance from our national sufferings, but you, Jesus, have showed us no sympathy nor sought to free us from gentile taxes or from gentile rule – 'we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn'.

And so, the vast majority rejected both their greatest prophet and their Messiah.

'And wisdom is justified by her works'.

For, though both John and Jesus were rejected by the many, the results of their preaching and works were such as to fully justify any apparent difference between them.

And God's 'wisdom' – personified – is acquitted of any error – vindicated by the results which her actions achieved in the lives of those to whom God revealed His truth, v. 25.

As John expressed it at the opening of his gospel, 'He (the Lord Jesus) came to His own, and His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name', John 1. 11-12.

God willing, next Sunday, Linda and I celebrate our wedding anniversary. But today is Napoleon's; for 212 years ago exactly²¹, Napoleon married his Josephine ... although I understand that he managed to turn up two hours late for the wedding because he had forgotten all about it. Just be grateful *you* haven't been kept two hours late this evening.

Endnotes

¹ John's message is repeated verbatim in the proclamation of Jesus, Matt. 4. 17, and that of the disciples, Matt. 10.

7. All preach the same message.

² Matthew 4. 12.

³ Luke 3. 19.

⁴ Herodias also appears to have taken the initiative in her divorce with Philip, which was contrary to Jewish law. See Mark 10. 12 and Harold W. Hoehner, '*Herod Antipas*', pages 139-140. Antipas divorced his first wife, the daughter of the Nabatean king Aretas IV, to marry Herodius. Aretas took umbrage at insult offered daughter and few years later seized an opportunity to declare war on Antipas, and inflicted a heavy defeat on him. See F. F. Bruce, '*Israel and the Nations*', page 203.

⁵ Herod the Great had built a magnificent palace within the fortress there. 'Machaerus ... marked the extreme point south ... in Peraea. As the boundary fortress in the southeast (towards Arabia), its safety was of the greatest importance, and everything was done to make a place, exceedingly strong by nature, impregnable. It had been built by Alexander Jannaeus, but destroyed by Gabinius in the wars of Pompey. It was not only restored, but greatly enlarged, by Herod the Great, who surrounded it with the best defences known at that time. In fact, Herod the Great built a town along the shoulder of the hill, and surrounded it by walls, fortified by towers. From this town a farther height had to be climbed, on which the castle stood, surrounded by walls, and flanked by towers one hundred and sixty cubits high. Within the enclosure of the castle Herod had built a magnificent palace', A. Edersheim, '*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*', chapter XXVIII, book III, para. 3. See Matthew 14. 6-11.

⁶ See 'Moments with the Master', Precious Seed, pages 392-395.

⁷ Luke 7. 18.

⁸ This is the only place in Matthew where the title 'the Christ' standing alone refers to Jesus. Matthew evidently referred to Jesus this way here to underscore the fact that Jesus was the Messiah.

⁹ Matt. 3. 11-12.

¹⁰ For John's familiarity with Isaiah's prophecy, see A. Edersheim, '*The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*', chapter III, book III, footnote 1 on page 337.

¹¹ Probably derived from Psalm 118. 26; see Mark 11. 9; Luke 13. 35; 19. 38.

¹² Matthew does not even report how the Baptist, when the answer reached him, reacted to it. This confirms that ultimately it is not John who forms the subject of the story but Jesus who does.

¹³ To followed up 'among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist', with, 'But he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he', was a deliberate paradox. For, if John was not surpassed in greatness by any human being, how could anyone be greater than he?

¹⁴ The statement should be considered in the light of our Lord's words, 'But blessed are your eyes, because they see, and your ears, because they hear. I solemnly declare to you, many prophets and righteous persons longed to see what you are seeing, yet did not see it, and to hear what you are hearing, yet did not hear it', Matt. 13. 16-17.

¹⁵ Luke 16. 16

¹⁶ Only men of earnestness and vigour can secure the kingdom. Compare John Bunyan's description of the man with his drawn sword who made his way into the palace. Compare, 'Strive to enter by the narrow door', Luke 13. 24. And see TDNT, volume 1, pages 611-612.

¹⁷ The attitude of Israel to the herald and the King determined the time of the kingdom's manifestation in glory. Had the Jews received John as the forerunner of Jesus, had they repented and receive the kingdom, then John would have been Elijah to them. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight we now know that there were to be two comings of the Lord, the first as Saviour and sin-bearer and the second as judge. Malachi's prophecy is therefore capable of being fulfilled at each appearing, first in the form of John the Baptist and in the future in the form of another man. In this view John served to 'turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers', Mal. 4. 6, while the 'Elijah' that is to come will announce the Lord's coming in judgment, Mal. 3. 1. God's answer to the impious complaints of the wicked men and women of Malachi's day who mockingly sneered, 'Where is the God of justice?' was to send his messenger to prepare the way for the God, Mal. 3. 1. But verse 2 warned that most would not be able to stand when that day of judgment came. Not only would the heathen gentiles be judged, but so too would the ungodly in Israel. John could be identified as Elijah only because the same Spirit and power that had energized Elijah had now fallen on him. By quoting this passage Jesus was affirming His identity as Messiah. He viewed John as potentially fulfilling the prophecy about Elijah preparing the way for Yahweh and the day of the Lord. Whether John exhausted its fulfilment depended on Israel's acceptance of her Messiah then; see Matt. 11. 14.

¹⁸ Neither Jesus nor John accumulated earthly possessions, nor indulged in worldly or sensual pleasure. But John was a wilderness prophet, whereas Jesus accepted invitations to meals and banquets.

¹⁹ The idea of affection, which through common use of the words has fallen so much into the background both in the Greek and our English 'friend', is brought out clearly in the Syriac, which is, perhaps, the very word that our Lord spoke.

²⁰ The charge that Jesus was a glutton and a drunkard perhaps alludes to the 'rebellious son' of Deuteronomy 21. 20 – who was guilty of a capital offence!

²¹ March 9 1796.