

Sunday 1st Oct. 2017
Jesus and John the Baptist

Texts. Isa. 61.1-3 and Luke 7. 18-35

The background to this story is found in the early chapters of Luke. Mark 6 tells of the death of John at the hands of Herod. Luke tells us of John's birth, and that he was appointed a prophet from before his birth. He was of similar age and was related to Jesus.

Even though we know about the birth history of John, he bursts onto the scene in chapter 3 like Elijah did in 1 Kings 17. A rough man in rough clothes appears from the desert preaching an uncompromising message and a call to repentance, as the preparation for a greater who was to come. John was of striking appearance, and the message was that of the prophets of old. He was fearless, even rebuking Herod for taking his brother's wife as his own. It was this latter pronouncement that landed him in jail.

These features combined with the fact that the authentic prophetic voice had not been heard for over 300 years all added to the stir that arose over him. John drew a group of disciples around him and taught them. He taught them to pray, but there is no indication that his disciples reproduced his ministry of calling for the people to repent and be baptized with a baptism of repentance.

John baptized Jesus and witnesses the Holy Spirit descend on Him in bodily form and hears the voice from heaven telling John that this was God's beloved son, and to do what He said. This is found in Matthew 3. Sometime after this, John identifies Jesus as the one he spoke about, the greater than he, who was to come. The combination of the appearance of John, his authoritative message, and the pointing to a coming one causes a great stirring of hope and expectations amongst the ordinary people.

Excitement can be both good and bad. It is good to be stirred up in expectation of God acting on His promises, but it is dangerous when the promises have been worked and reworked in such a way that they are no longer what God has promised! This almost always happens when there is great expectation roused, and all sorts of hopes are expected to be fulfilled.

The populous were of different opinions as to who John was and who he was as regards God's plans for the nation. Some thought that he was the Messiah, even though he had denied this. Others thought that he was Elijah raised from the dead, and this was nearer the truth, but not quite! Others thought that he was one of the great Old Testament prophets returned in some way. You can imagine the variety of opinions! Just think about all the views there are about Brexit, either a great disaster waiting to happen, or a great liberation on its way, and everything in between. The tongues were wagging, and news was eagerly being listened to, just in case that was the big event the

Jews were awaiting!

But what were the Jews waiting for? They were waiting for the coming of a Messiah, a great deliverer. The nation had had many examples to go on. Abraham who was the father of the nation by a miracle. There was Moses, who had led the Children of Israel out of Egypt so that they were born a nation in a day. There were the prophets whose faith and prayer had saved the nation in many days of trouble and so on. Probably many people had constructed some sort of picture in their own minds. We find this today when the TV interviewers ask people about an issue what they would like to see happen, or what such and such means to them. Rarely do two people give answers that could stand together, and this is why excitement without wisdom is dangerous!

John was uncompromising and politically incorrect and not at all accommodating to the norms of his day, and it landed him in jail. Herod had married his brother's wife, and John confronted him with his immorality. The new wife, Herodias, was not pleased about this and persuaded Herod to have him arrested and later tricked him into killing John.

It was after John was arrested that the ministry of Jesus had begun in earnest. The setting of Luke 7 is a series of teachings and miracles that Jesus spoke and performed. John had pointed his own disciples to Jesus as the greater to come, and some of them switched allegiance, as it were to Jesus. There is no hint of this causing a problem, because one of the endearing features of John was that he had publically declared his knowledge that as Jesus ministry rose, his would set. He had said that he must decrease, and Christ must increase, so there was never any bad blood between them.

There is a lesson in that last observation alone. Paul asked the Corinthians what they had that had not been given to them. This is a good thing for ministers, elders and all of us to remember, we are debtors to God alone, everything is a gift, so we have no grounds to be proud, but every reason to be humble.

We are told in Luke 7 v 18 that John's disciples had seen and heard Jesus doing these things and reported back to John. On hearing what they told him, he dispatched two of them back to Jesus with this cryptic question, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect another?'

All sorts of explanations have been offered regarding this question, but most agree that it is a most searching question, one that is seeking to ascertain certainty in the midst of doubt or confusion. Why did John need to ask this when he had heard and seen what he saw at Jesus baptism? What was it that caused his concern as to Jesus identity?

It was a concern that arose from

1. History and,
2. from expectation.

1. History.

If you were to read Ezra and Nehemiah, you would find that one of the complaints of Israel's enemies, after their return from captivity, was that these were a nation of trouble makers. If you read the later chapters of Acts, and the various trials of Paul before the authorities, a sub plot in the text is the fact that Jewish affairs were tricky. No one wanted to upset them because if they were upset, then that made your task, as a governor of the district difficult, when your job was to maintain the Pax Romana!

Over the previous centuries there had been a series of reforming groups, rebellions, uprisings and some who came as false Messiahs. In other words, there was a sense in which this had all happened before, and even then the latest revolt had been led by Barabbas, who was the criminal later released instead of Jesus! From a historical perspective, was this just another excitement, or was it truly the real thing.

As a side matter, do you remember Simeon and Anna in the Temple when Jesus was brought there as a seven day old baby. They recognized Jesus as the Messiah, and Simeon was ready to depart as he had seen the fulfillment of the coming of Messiah. These two represented another outlook in the land, a minority group, but they would in the past have been called, 'The Quiet in the Land,' who were looking spiritually, not for an earthly deliverer.

This is a very pertinent question today. I remember going to a conference in the early 90's in London, and the buzz was that some prophetic voice had said that out of this gathering a great Revival would break out. We only became aware of this excitement after we arrived, we had driven a long way and all night to get there, and even though we arrived a couple of hours early, the queue to get in was already round the building, much to my annoyance. All I wanted was to get in and get a coffee!

By the way, Revival did not break out, and the main speaker at the conference had a difficult task in handling the situation.

The Toronto Blessing was a bit different. There was a revival element in this, but it was not as universally transferrable as was thought, but that's another story. Even Jesus warns that there would be those who would claim to be Christ returned, and the Epistles speak of false apostles, teachers and demons that work to deceive.

We are easily deceived. All of us like a bit of excitement, but not all excitement is real. Jonathan Edwards lived through two main periods of revival in his community and beyond, and investigated the sad aftermath that some or many who appeared to be saved and blessed during the revival went back to their previous life style when the revival waned. The book is, 'The Religious Affections.' This is not an easy book to read, not only because of the language used, but because the searching nature of his work is alien to today's Christian mindset – unfortunately. He did not come to a certain conclusion, because that cannot be done with God's work. However, his view was that many people had been caught up in the excitement and that the fire had never fully

been kindled in their hearts.

It is probably along these lines that John's question lies, is this the real thing?

2. However, that is not the only reason for the question. John also had his own expectations for the Messiah.

All the previous types, shadows of the Messiah, had brought deliverance and restoration to Israel. They had taken them into or back into the Promised Land, or had overcome great armies which threatened the nation, but Jesus had not done this. In fact, you may remember Jesus actively avoided the people proclaiming Him their King, and only accepted this title when He went up to die!

The nation was under the rule of Rome. It was a good rule in some ways, but what nation is there that wants to remain a slave of another! Certainly a proud and independent people like the Jews, who regarded themselves as special to God, even though they had failed God at every point! John was looking for Jesus to do something about the captivity of Israel to Rome, and this did not seem to be on His agenda, hence John's concern.

Let us at this point look at Jesus response to John's question. He did not get mad, He did not get cross, He did not put John down as if the question asked was the worst sin anyone could commit. Remember, John is in prison, and though he did not know it, his life was about to end. I think Jesus answers in a very gentle loving way, but that was not all there was in the answer, such as it was. Jesus reply was not a definitive, black and white answer, but it was one that directed John to come to the answer himself.

Jesus replies alluding to the Messianic promise of Isaiah 61, and points John to this consideration, that what He was doing was exactly what was prophesised the Messiah would do. However He also places emphases on the proclaiming of good news to the poor, and then this strange sentence. 'Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.'

Fall away here is a rendering of the word that means to turn away in offence or displeasure, to be let down and so on. What does this mean? What it means is this, if you have set your heart on a red bike for Christmas, and you get a blue one, your expectation has been disappointed. The day may not have been spoiled because you got a bike. What if we hoped for a pony for Christmas, a real pony, and what we got was a toy pony, then that would spoil the day. What about this? There is a job promotion opens in your work. The boss makes an appointment to see you over an important matter, what do you think? You think you are going to get offered the job. Perhaps you tell your wife, and discreetly let it be known in the office that there is something about to happen – excitement. You see your boss, and he tells you that another person has been given the job, and you are being asked to be his aid, 'don't think of it as a demotion, but the utilization of your gifts and talents in the best interest of the company!'

How do you feel?. Do you hand in your resignation on the spot, or go and sit in a dark corner for the rest of the day, week, or your life?!

This was the situation John was in. His hopes, noble hopes, of a great national deliverance from Roman rule were not happening. Other things were happening, healings, deliverances, good news preached, but the pet desire of John, national liberation was not. Jesus says, don't be offended if your interpretation and preferences of what the Kingdom, or salvation should look like are not His. In truth, John's vision was too small and too materialistic. John had fallen into too much material thinking about nations and reputations and so on. Christ was about something much bigger. Christ was at work over an eternal liberation, a perfect salvation for time and eternity, and not the liberation of a nation, but the coming of a new heaven and earth!

Here is the crux of the situation. Church history is full of instances when individuals, groups, and even whole peoples went off the rails and got stuck in the mud. The Reformation was an event, a period of rediscovering truth which had got lost in all the rubbish men had adorned it with. Free grace had been lost in self-righteous work to appease God! For a time, the Moravian Brethren lost their way and substituted childishness for child likeness. Because of our incomplete sanctification in this life, there is always a spiritual gravity pulling us down towards sin, or into sin. If you doubt it, read some biographies and see how the great Christian men and women found struggles in their lives – it is not only we who struggle!

Jesus, by not giving John a line by line and verse by verse answer, but is calling him to engage with what is true of the ministry of Jesus, and not give such place to what we would like Him to do for us. This is the great sadness of many African Christians in our day, they are being promised health and wealth, and in giving their attention to this, they lose encounter with Jesus. It is easy to forget that Christ offers 'all these things will be added,' to those who firstly seek His Kingdom and its righteousness. We are firstly to seek the giver, and not the gift!

There is a phrase in Ephesians 3 v 18 which is important at this point. The phrase is, 'the unsearchable riches of Christ.' Christ is very rich, so it is not that He does not have everything. He is very generous, He gives to the just and the unjust, and life to all, even to those who hate Him. Having given us Christ to die for us, even while we were dead in sin, and hostile to Him, Paul tells us that having given Christ, God does not withhold anything from us, because in comparison to Christ, anything else is small fry, then why is it that God does not give us cars and money and good looks and all sorts of things we desire?

Well, some do get some of these things, but what Jesus was doing with John was getting him to look at Him, not just what He could do. It is a misunderstood fact, that God is not committed to pleasing us, or giving us pleasure, but He is committed to our happiness, eternal happiness, and making us holy. He will do this by giving us nice stuff and by removing it or withholding it, whatever is best for our good and His plans!

God wants us to be seeking the person of Christ above all else, because all blessings are in Him, and if we are in Him, then all blessings are ours, now or/and in eternity, and it is this that Jesus is drawing John back to.

There is much more that should be said, but a limit of one will have to do. What Christ offers is Grace. The word is often used, and the old hymn writers had more to say about it than we do. The word is used often and has lost something in translation. The truth is that everything is by grace. Grace is that mysterious and incredible disposition of God to love the unlovely, the rebel, the sinner, the malcontent, with no expectation of there being a return to Him at all. We live in grace, we exist because of grace, and an eternity with Him is only because of His grace.

If this is so, what are wealth or honours of this life, or any other trinket the world can offer? Grace is the richest of all riches, the gift above all other gifts, and this grace is found in Christ alone and abounding. Therefore what could be better than to seek Him alone and for Himself, and not to get offended when He does not yield to our childish tantrums because He has not given us this or that, or done things in the way we wanted! There are many things I wanted God to do for me over many years, and most of them I am now glad He did not do or give. I have also discovered that often I have asked for a crumb of bread, and God has given me a whole loaf, better than I could think to ask!

We are to look and pay close attention to Jesus as revealed in the Scriptures. We see Him in figures and types in the Old Testament. Hebrews 1 tells us that God has now spoken by His Son. This is Jesus who we can read about in the Gospels, all He began to say and to do. We can see how Jesus interacted with people, the ones who He had lots of time for, others whom He had hard words for, like the Pharisees. In the Epistles we learn the significance of Christ's death and resurrection and the empty tomb and His exaltation to the right hand of the Father. These are the things we need to be looking at as of first importance, and not on what we can get from God in this life alone. Looking for Christ alone will also make it easier to lay down our stuff when required or at the last!