

Reading: Matthew 11:1-19

Theme: Jesus speaks highly of John.

Last time we saw that John had questions regarding Jesus; we also noted Jesus' answer to him. We were reminded and encouraged that it is not wrong to have doubts and questions and we too can go to God, ask Him for answers, for the material to answer such questions and remove our doubts. The trouble is we do not always like to admit our doubts, our questions for we may feel that people could look down upon us, or think we are foolish or unspiritual or perhaps have not been paying attention, or we should know more. It could be that we are too proud to admit we do not have all the answers, even too proud to admit we have doubts and questions!

John had no such hang-ups, he sent and questioned Jesus. I wonder what people must have thought of this great prophet, this revolutionary man who'd shaken and stirred the people of Israel in his meteoric rise and ministry? They may have had a downer on him and after a year of him being in prison, or many may have forgotten him and his ministry. He could so easily have been dismissed as of little consequence, especially when he, such a supposedly great man of God, had sent and asked Jesus basic questions!

After John's disciples went back to him, Jesus spoke honourably and highly of John to honour him and his ministry as well as to counteract such false views and sentiments that may have been going about. This was to honour John, not to puff up his pride! I want us to look at 3 things from v7-19 and apply them to our own lives. Jesus speaks of:

1. A Great Prophet. (v7-11)

Jesus asked the people questions regarding John. What did you go out in the desert to see? He wanted them to think why they were

willing to leave homes, cities, towns and go out into desert places, to think of the tremendous impact John made on them all, so much so that they were willing to travel to hostile and harsh places to hear John. It wasn't to hear a man who was like reed - blown about by the wind of public or popular opinion. John was like a sturdy oak, standing firm against the evils of society, against popular opinion if it went against the truth of God's word. John was a firm and resolute man, who was not moved even when he had to expose the wrong of king Herod.

Jesus asked them if they went out to see a fashion show, a man in fine clothes! Obviously not! John was a rustic, and almost wild man in appearance - with coat and clothes of camel's hair, a leather girdle, belt around his waist. He ate wild honey and locusts. He lived and preached in the desert - his manner of dressing and attitudes all corresponded with the serious manner he had and he was not some softy dressed up to the nines for a fashion parade, or dressed to flatter and impress the king. John did not flatter the king, but he challenged and confronted him; he even rebuked king Herod for his royal sin and his reward was that he was detained at his majesty's pleasure in the royal dungeons!

Jesus told the people to remember what struck and impressed them about John and his teaching. Surely, they were not going to put him down because he had some doubts and questions. That merely illustrates the point that even the best of men are but men at their best.

We ourselves need to be those who are sturdy and unwavering in the truth, need to be as trees planted by streams of water and Psalm 1 shows us how to be such as we delight in God's word and meditate on it. We are not to be blown about with the pressures of society around us, by pressures from friends or enemies to depart

from that which is good, right and pleasing to God. We ourselves are not to be reeds blown about by the fads of society, nor by new fads of doctrine or teaching that blows into churches. We have God's word and we are to be rooted and grounded in it. It is to affect our lives and anchor us in the realities of God's will for us. It will give us a solidarity and foundation in our lives. We will then know right from wrong and if needs be, we will expose error in whoever does the error - whether friend or foe, loved ones, family or not known to us personally.

Jesus went on to further speak of John as a great prophet in v9ff. This is why the people went out to see this one. He was not merely any old teacher or prophet, but the very herald of the Lord, of the King who was to prepare the way for the King. Jesus quotes words from Malachi 3:1 where Malachi spoke of John's coming to prepare the way for the Lord. John was not merely saying that the King would come one day, but was saying look that "*He is here among us now!*" John could say "*Behold the Lamb of God...*" John was unique in that he was both the herald of the King and the prophet who was also prophesied of who would come and do that work!

This is again emphasised by Jesus in v11, but this verse also says more, much more. Yes, John had fulfilled his prophesied task as a herald by announcing the arrival of the King, preaching the need of repentance to enter the kingdom and then being willing to recede into the background when the King came on the scene. John had done all these things and we note, from Luke's account of his birth, that John was full of the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb and all these things must be considered here in this verse.

Humanly speaking John now seemed unimportant and people could be so ready to dismiss him. Yet Jesus shows John was a

great prophet. Was Jesus saying that John was a greater prophet than Moses, Samuel, Elijah or Isaiah or Ezekiel etc.? We are to realise that greatness is not to be measured by outward pomp, splendour, wealth, success or power, but greatness, true greatness is to be godlike, Christ-like and John was this in his life and ministry. Incredibly Jesus goes on and says in v11b “yet...” Now this is not an easy saying! John with all his record, all his knowledge, of him being filled with the Spirit from his mother’s womb is eclipsed by someone who is least in the kingdom of heaven! In other words, John stands top of the OT way of things, but basically anyone in the NT way of salvation is better off than him.

This does not mean that John was not saved, but that we, in NT times, know and see more than John ever could or did. He, as the last of the OT prophets, looked forward to, pointed to Jesus through the ever-lessening night-time of OT’s fading shadows. At John’s time it was the dawn of day, by the time of Acts 2 full noon had come and we live and see that light with greater clarity and privileges. John did not see the events of Calvary, Easter Sunday or Pentecost. If we are in the kingdom of heaven, we are there by faith in the risen living Lord Jesus and we have greater known privileges than John ever did, for we are justified by faith, redeemed, ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, adopted as God’s child, have the Spirit witnessing we are His child.

We are to make no mistake and realise that John was a great prophet and Jesus spoke of that fact. Jesus also spoke of:

2. A Great Fulfilment. (v12-15)

John was so important in God’s plans that the kingdom of God had been advancing remarkably since John’s time, when he began ministering. We have to note that v12 is a strange picture. The AV

translates it as *“from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.”* The NIV says... The Greek words here are difficult to translate as they can be taken in 2 ways: violence = violently or vigorously; forcefully advancing = by force, seizing or taking possession or to hold on. The force of the words depends on what tenses we take the Greek as, for the same spelling is used of 2 tenses! We get this happening in English e.g. “I read a book” could be taken as “I am reading a book” or “I read a book” (past tense).

So what! I think here it is the latter of the 2 tenses i.e. past tense that gives the idea concerning John’s ministry. John’s ministry had stirred people up to seek God, to find out the truth and make their peace with God. They were no longer lethargic or indifferent to God’s kingdom, but now they wanted to make it theirs and they vigorously sought God - it was a most energetic and active thing. Over the years we have probably seen pictures of people queueing for a sale - say a New Year Day’s sale – they camped out overnight and then the doors opened, in they rushed to get that which they wanted and even fights occurred over items! This is the picture here - forcefully advancing, forceful, vigorous people seeking God.

We to realise that God is not usually found by lazy seekers; the blessing of salvation is not entered into by chance, but we must apply ourselves. Please pray that my ministry would stir people up to be vigorous, active seekers after God and will be used by God to cause people to do so.

John is presented as the fulfilment and completion of the OT law and prophets. He was the last prophet under the OT way - which pointed on to Jesus - His birth, life, death, resurrection and the glorious salvation He achieved. John pointed on to Jesus, was able

to say “*He is here, He is among us, look here He is!*” John is the bridge between OT prophets and NT preachers. We are privileged to have both OT and NT to read and study. There is a saying that goes something like “*The new is in the old concealed, the old is in the new revealed.*” The OT’s light is like that of a lamp, but the NT’s light is the bright noon sunlight. Thankfully, we have the privilege of both and John is seen as important, but is eclipsed by the Lord Jesus.

John also fulfilled OT prophecy himself. Jesus says he fulfilled the great prophecy of the expectation of Elijah coming as we can read of in Malachi 4:5. The Jews expected Elijah to literally come again, but it meant one in the spirit and power of Elijah (Luke 1:17) - who would turn the nation back to God as Elijah did. John did this and Jesus points this out - if they were willing to accept, listen and understand! They indeed had ears, but would they hear?

I wonder if we will hear what God is saying to us. Do we listen to God’s word as we read it or it is preached? Do we consider the message and claims of the gospel of Jesus? Or are we content to dwell on our own little problems, daydreams, circumstances and let our immortal souls be lost forever? We are to realise God’s warnings of eternal punishment i.e. hell will be fulfilled, even for you in your life if you do not believe on the Lord Jesus. The gospel’s offer of salvation can also be fulfilled in your life, for the word of God is sure and reliable and both His warnings and promises stand. Which would we have fulfilled in our lives? Jesus also spoke of:

3. A Fickle Generation. (v16-19)

Jesus condemns that generation for being fickle, for being out of sorts children. He pictures children squabbling with one another as to what to play and do – “*Let’s play weddings*”; “*No*”; “*Let’s*

play funerals”; “No” - for the one was too happy, yet the other too sad!

Jesus applied this to His generation which said that John had a demon because he wasn't sociable; yet Jesus came eating and drinking, a friend of all sorts of people and they called Him names and gave Him derisory labels! Jesus was saying that they were childish, irresponsible, inconsistent, never satisfied and therefore fickle! They changed their minds and reasons as they wanted, as it suited them for their own ends. They would not listen to God or His messenger, whoever that messenger was. John was tolerated, was stood in awe of for a while, but he was soon side-lined. Jesus was listened to, but He too would be rejected and they would make sure He was killed!

People haven't changed through the generations, even in our days. People will not go to church because... Yet if their particular objection was removed, then they would have another objection, followed by another objection! Some people don't bother listening to a preacher because he's too long, too short, too strict, too humorous, too authoritarian, too indecisive, too intellectual or too simple! People are still as fickle! People will use any excuse not to listen to and obey God's word to them, maybe someone here is doing this today!

I wonder if anyone here is among the fickle ones who would ignore God on a pretext of this or that not being right, not to their taste? I urge you not to be a fickle fool. The gospel might sound like a load of nonsense to you and remarkably the Bible says that's exactly what it is – foolishness! We are told this in 1 Corinthians 1:18 *“For the message of the cross is foolishness... to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* If the gospel, the cross of Christ is foolishness, nonsense to

you - then the Bible says you are perishing, but remarkably through the foolishness of what is preached, God is pleased to save people like us who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.

I would urge us all not to be fickle. There is no fault with the message, there is no reduction in your need to be saved through that same gospel, it is just that you cannot see your need. Listen to and consider God's message - whether sounding joyful or sad! See God's wisdom is right in sending you this message through the foolishness of preaching.

Are you going to listen to God's word as it comes to you? Or will you be fickle and use any and every excuse to continue to ignore God and the offer of eternal life He makes to you in this service. I pray we will all hear and obey what God would say to us and that we would go on to live to serve Him for all our days.