

Sunday 15th December

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

The gospel reading today is about John the Baptist in prison sending his disciples out to ask questions as to whether Jesus was the Messiah. He had heard about what was happening – and needed to know the answer.

Its an incident that had always made me wonder. As we recalled last week, John the Baptist knew Jesus – probably from childhood. They were related of course. They had probably spent time together as they were growing up.

And the story we heard last week – the story of John baptizing and Jesus coming to him for baptism – clearly shows us that John not only knew Jesus as a person, but also knew who Jesus really was – knew that he was Gods anointed one -the *'one who is to come'*. After all he said, *I am not even worthy to carry your sandals*. And he would have heard that voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism – *This is my Son whom I love – with him I am well pleased*

All of which makes what happens in this passage even more strange. What has changed? Why is John asking this question – *Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?* What is making him doubt?

Has he changed – or has Jesus changed. Or has John's perception of Jesus changed? What is going on?

Sometimes we wait for something, anticipate something and look forward to something, but when it happens it turns out to be completely different to what we expected.

And this could be down to our misunderstanding of the information we have, or our own foolishness or blindness in the way we interpreted it.

We go to the Greenbelt festival most summers. It's a broadly Christian arts and music festival, with many interesting talks being given about all kinds of faith related topics. It takes place in the grounds of a stately home in Northamptonshire, and most of the venues for music and talks and acts of worship are marquees of varying sizes.

Last Summer on the Sunday afternoon I checked through the programme and saw something I thought would be both interesting and amusing – The sacred art of joking, it was called – Christian comedians talking about comedy,

including the comedy within the Bible. I went to the venue and settled down on my chair waiting for it to begin. I must say that it seemed a little odd that most of the people gathering in the marquee were young women, but I didn't worry too much about that.

However, I was somewhat surprised when the event started and it turned out to be a panel discussion on hair – particularly the merits or otherwise of afro hair. Not being over endowed with the stuff myself, it had never occurred to me just what variety of afro hair types there might be, and just how complex the care of such hair is.

Trying to look cool, I discretely looked at my festival programme and found that I had misread the venue. I should be about 100 yards away in a different marquee – the one where I could hear all the laughter coming from!

I think that John the Baptist – like the religious leaders, like most of the people of Israel at the time – had read the Old testament prophecies like the one we had from Isaiah in a particular way, and had assumed that the coming Messiah would be someone who would establish a new physical Kingdom of Israel.

They were looking for a new King, someone who would liberate the Jewish people from the Roman occupation, someone who would make Israel great again, someone who could bring together the old testament prophet and king roles; someone who could be the true leader of the nation. Someone who could be powerful in his prophetic deeds like Elijah was when he dealt with the prophets of Baal- but also be wise and strong and ruthless in his rule like the great King David.

Hold that in mind for a moment.

Now think about what took place between the baptism of Jesus in Chapter 3 of Matthews gospel and the incident we read about today in chapter 11.

Jesus teaching in for example the Sermon on the mount. Radical teaching of the kind that hadn't been heard before. Speaking of peace and humility and love; the mild and meek being blessed, honour for the merciful etc etc. He talked about being salt and light in the world and the importance of how we live.

He reinterpreted the Old Testament laws – but claimed he had come to fulfil the Law and Prophets, not abolish them.. A phrase keeps occurringYou have heard that it was said, but I say.

He said it was not just about what people did, but what they thought as well, about motivations and what was in the heart. He told them to turn the other cheek, to give and give and give, to love not only friends but also enemies

He spoke about a new intimacy with God. Praying to him as abba, father. Talking of a loving and caring God, rather than a vengeful and judging God. Speaking of a God who forgives and urging people to be ready to do the same.

He warned against wealth and materialism and reassured people that this loving God really cares about them – and will uphold and protect them. This God will give what we need to live by - what we need, not what we want. Ask and you will receive etc

He told people to be wary of judging others - the need to take a good look at themselves first and see where they can improve things in their own lives. Telling them that it was all too easy to slip off the right path, to be led astray by false prophets -. those who purport to come from God and speak his message yet don't. Who are just out to deceive and lead people astray.

And then he spent time with untouchables – those on the margins - the man with leprosy, the roman centurion whose servant was ill. He had contact with the ill, the demon possessed, and spoke about the cost of being a disciple, and the challenges it would bring.

There's the story of the calming of the storm. It would appear he had authority over the natural elements. And then we find him forgiving someone's sins – the paralysed man. Who is it that forgives sins and causes the wind to stop blowing??

He was talking about the Kingdom of Heaven or Kingdom of God – not an earthly physical place, but anywhere and anyone who accepted the Kingship – the rule – of God. Anyone who sought to follow him and trust him.

Now, imagine you were John the Baptist. Your job was the prepare the way for the Messiah. You knew that. You had baptised him in the Jordan. You had seen him anointed and heard the voice from heaven.

But the things he was saying and the things he was doing were nothing like what you had expected.

Where was the revolution? Where was the call to arms to overthrow the Romans? Where were the rallying cries to the people to rise up?

Its not surprising that John was wondering what was going on. This wasn't what he had expected. Had he made a mistake about Jesus?

Well, as we know, he had made a mistake – but it was about his perceptions of the Messiah rather than the person of Jesus. He and the religious leaders and so many more besides had simply got it wrong; they had read it wrong, *they had effectively turned up in the wrong marquee.*

John had to change his understanding of God, his view of how God might act and what he might do.

And its all too easy to limit our expectations and understanding of God. To put him into a box that we have made. And to be wary of anything beyond those boundaries – even to the point of not believing God can act outside of the boundaries we have created for him.

But Jesus came teaching and demonstrating a new and bigger vision of the love and purposes of God. Those who responded and accepted – the disciples for example – gained immeasurably. Their loves were enriched and fulfilled. They were enlivened and encouraged. They blossomed and developed into their full potential. They became the people God had always intended them to be. But they had to take that leap. To take that step of faith. To leave the familiar behind..

Are we ready, like them, to be challenged and changed by the gospel. Or are we content for the gospel to be kept in a box we have created or accepted, and remain where we are and have always been? This year as we remember the birth of Jesus, will we just want the same old story – or should we be looking for a new truth, a new vision of the love and grace of God

I believe that God wants to show us great things; to use us in great ways. And I hope that we will want him to do so. But first we have to accept that this may well involve something new and different; possibly a step of faith into the unknown and uncomfortable. Doing something a bit different, being ready for to do something new, but being confident he will be alongside us.