

Faith, Hope and Stumbling

A sermon on Matthew 11: 2-11 by Nathan Nettleton, 11 December 2016

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Message

Jesus Christ is the coming one who will fulfill the hopes and yearnings of the world, but we will imperil our faith and hope if we keep trying to set the agendas for him.

Sermon

If you are looking to make some cheap jokes at the expense of some group of Christians, then one of the really easy targets is those various groups who are so focussed on the end time prophecies that they are always coming up with a prediction of the day and the hour when Christ is to return in glory, and then having to pick themselves up and work themselves out all over again when the appointed hour passes and Jesus fails to show up.

One of the difficulties they then face is the deep disillusionment that comes with failed expectations. A lot of people never recover, and drop out. They put all their hopes in a particular outcome, and their faith has failed to deliver. Maybe there is really nothing in this “Coming Christ” stuff after all.

This sort of thing has been an issue throughout the history of the Christian Church. You don’t have to have named a date for it to be a problem. Even with a more general expectation that Christ will soon return to set all things right, when year after year passes with things still seriously not right in the world and Christ still not showing up to do anything about it, the promises can begin to sound hollow and our faith begin to wear thin.

A number of the oldest passages in the New Testament make it clear that the early churches expected Christ to return in glory any day. But some of the letters and gospels written later show the churches already beginning to grapple with the problems of people feeling frustrated and disillusioned that it still hadn’t happened.

Our readings from James and Matthew tonight were examples of these later writings. James is urging his readers to be patient until the coming of the Lord. They are to strengthen their hearts and not grumble against each other. As people who have been in prison camps or lived under oppressive regimes can tell you, when downtrodden people start losing hope, they are in real danger of beginning to turn on one another in their frustration and anger.

Matthew, like a number of the other New Testament writers, was writing after the Roman sacking of Jerusalem to a church who had already seen the destruction of the temple and various other things that Jesus had said would be signs that the end was near, and yet everything seemed to be settling down to a new status quo and still there was no sign of the coming Christ. Doubts begin to eat their way into many believers.

Now it may be beginning to sound as though we should forget about any hopes of the return of Christ and just ditch that part of the apostolic teaching. It is only going to lead to disappointment. But not only do I not think we should ditch it, I don’t think that doing so would protect us from disappointment either. There are plenty of other things to be disappointed about.

It is not at all uncommon to meet people who have been brought up as evangelical Christians but have now given it away. Somehow it failed to live up to their expectations and they left in a cloud of disillusionment. For some, the breaking point was a marriage failure, and that doesn't much surprise me, because that was nearly me after my first marriage failed.

Like me, many people had had this idea that, being faithful Christians, God would ensure that their marriages worked beautifully. And so when the marriage hits the rocks, faith gets smashed up with it. And to make things worse, in some churches your marriage breakup is a threat to everyone else's faith as well, and the only way they can hold their faith together is to demonise you. I was lucky; I didn't cop that, but I know people who did.

It can be all kinds of other things too. I know people whose Christian faith is looking increasingly shaky because world peace is looking further away than ever, or because the pace of overcoming sexism or racism or homophobia in the church is so slow. You don't have to be an apocalyptic fanatic to be feeling that Christ has failed to deliver what our faith in him should be delivering. There are any number of good reasons for doubt and questions going around.

Now, believe it or not, this was actually quite an issue in the midst of Jesus's ministry prior to his crucifixion too. In Matthew's gospel, John the Baptist had recognised Jesus as the messiah when he turned up to be baptised. John recognised him as the coming Lord who he had been preparing the way for. But in the story we heard tonight, John sends messengers to ask Jesus if he is really the one. He is starting to have some doubts. Any wonder!

As we heard last week, John had been expecting a Messiah who would come with flame thrower in hand to bring a fiery judgment to the earth. Like we sang in Mary's Canticle before, John was expecting the tyrants pulled down from their thrones and the captives set free, but now he is sitting in a prison cell himself and the tyrants will soon have his head on a plate. This was not in the script. Maybe he was wrong about Jesus. Are we still to wait for another, he asks.

And in Matthew's gospel this is a recurring theme – so we'll hear a bit about it over the coming year – faith is always a bit tenuous, and needs to be constantly nourished and renewed. Even the heroes of our faith have their times of doubt and despair; it's all part of the journey of discipleship.

The answer Jesus sends back to John is a bit cryptic. It is probably not going to make everything add up neatly for John. Jesus doesn't say "Yes I am the one," or "No I'm not, keep looking." Instead he says, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Now this is kind of half an answer. He seems to be pointing to prophecies like the one we heard from Isaiah, which we also sang much of in our opening song. "The eyes of the blind shall be opened, the ears of the deaf shall hear; the chains of the lame shall be broken." But there is no answer as to why so many other messianic expectations are still going begging. And then there is this cryptic parting line: "And blessed are those who take no offence at me."

Strangely enough, it may be this cryptic little line that we need to really hear and get a grip on when we are struggling with disappointed hopes. The Greek word translated as “take offence” here is skandalizein. It literally means to stumble over something, as in a stumbling block, and it is also the origin of our work scandal or to be scandalised.

So what Jesus is saying is, “Blessed are those who don’t find me to be a scandal that makes them stumble or fall away.” Or in more colloquial language, “Blessed are those who don’t get their knickers in a knot over me.” This is part of that theme about doubts and struggles in Matthew. Sometimes it seems to be Jesus and what he does that make us stumble. Sometimes he is the problem.

A big part of our problem with Jesus, much of the time, is that we have a tendency to hear things in the message of Jesus which connect with things that really matter to us, things which are huge on our agenda, and we latch on to them and build big and urgent expectations around them. Maybe it’s some social agenda – ridding the world or even just the church of sexism or homophobia or something – or some personal agenda like overcoming some personal weakness or having a perfect marriage. And having built up our expectations around this agenda, we lose sight of the fact that for Jesus, this agenda is just one little bit of a very very big picture. And our agendas may often be somewhat on hold while other things are attended to, and they may even be things which we would rather were not part of the picture at all. And it is easy for everyone to end up offended, scandalised, stumbling over him.

Those crusading against sexism are scandalised because Jesus is busy welcoming chauvinists and fashion gurus, and the sexists are scandalised because Jesus is making Mary Magdalene the first apostle and welcoming feminists. The traditional family values people are scandalised because Jesus is welcoming prostitutes and homosexuals, and the pro-gay crusaders are scandalised because Jesus accepts fundamentalists and homophobes as well.

And we want everything now. We want our agenda fulfilled even if it is at the expense of someone else’s agenda. In fact sometimes we specifically want it fulfilled AT the expense of someone else’s. And Jesus’ way becomes a stumbling block. We get disillusioned and ready to drop out.

And so the challenge for all of us is to stop trying to co-opt Jesus to our agendas and start trying to allow Jesus to co-opt us to his agenda. We have to try to stop projecting our messianic expectations onto Jesus and then assessing him by the extent to which he measures up to the standards we have set.

As long as we are telling him what it means to be the messiah and when he needs to step in and what needs to be done next to put the world aright, Jesus will fail us and scandalise and disappoint us.

But if we can let go of our own presumptuous expectations and begin to discern the action of the coming Christ in the things he is actually doing here and now, in the opening of stubbornly closed eyes, in the declaring to be clean of those who were shunned as unclean, in the moments when something given up as dead is suddenly up and full of life; if we can allow our expectations of the Messiah to be rewritten by the Messiah himself, then perhaps we will find ourselves gathered up into that wondrous vision, as the redeemed of the Lord come home, without stumbling, singing with joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing flee away.