

Go Tell John

A sermon on Isaiah 35:1-10 & Matthew 11:2-11 by Nathan Nettleton, 11 December 2022

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Message

Jesus asks us to assess the legitimacy of any ministry by its transforming and liberating outcomes for the world and its peoples.

Sermon

John the baptiser was in prison
when news reached him
about what Jesus the Messiah was doing.
He was perplexed.
It wasn't really what he was expecting.
It wasn't bad,
but it didn't tick all the boxes he was expecting to see ticked.
So when some of his followers visited him,
he sent them off to Jesus with a question:
"Are you the One everybody has been waiting for,
the long-awaited messiah,
or are we still waiting for someone else?"

Two thousand years later,
John's question is still being asked.
Often.
It is being asked, not only of Jesus,
but of churches and preachers,
of writers and thinkers and ordinary disciples.

Is this the real thing,
a life and faith that are true to God,
or has something gone astray here?
This seems different to the faith we've been taught,
the faith that we've been hearing all our lives.
What's going on?

The faith as it used to be preached
had a lot more John the Baptist about it.
There was a lot more fire and brimstone,
a lot more clear judgment of moral rights and wrongs,
a lot more clear cut teaching
that had to be believed,
or else.

The pathway to God was spelled out clearly in the book.
No room for argument.
Believe this. Behave like this. Don't do that.
Get it wrong,
and it was the winnowing fork,

and the axe at the root of the tree,
and the lake of fire for eternity.

So when a church or a preacher
tells it differently,
the same question arises again.
This doesn't seem like the message
of the One we were expecting.
What's going on here?
How are we to know
whether your message is legitimate,
or is a dangerous and treacherous departure from the script?

If people once regarded as unmentionable sinners
are now being welcomed in
and treated as equals,
can it be the true faith?
If people who can't even pretend to believe
in Noah's ark or the virgin birth
are allowed to come to the table
alongside those who believe without question
that every word is history,
are we really taking about the same thing,
a legitimate expression
of the faith passed down from the apostles?

Maybe the reason we are still asking the same question
that John's followers asked
is that Jesus didn't quite answer it back then.
Not in a clear-cut way, anyway.
He didn't say yes or no,
or spell out an explanation, a defence.

Instead, Jesus answered,
"Go and tell John what you've witnessed.
The blind are given their sight.
The paralysed are up and walking.
People with hideous diseases are cured.
The deaf can hear.
The dead are raised.
And the poor are hearing news worth celebrating.
How good it will be
for those who realise what I'm up to
and don't get their noses out of joint over it."

Or in other words, "Tell John what you've seen
and let him make up his own mind."

And I wonder whether there is any reason
to expect, or indeed to give,
any different an answer than that.
What's happening here?
Let it speak for itself.
Are these things you see happening
things you would expect to see
if God was at work,
or are they not?
You decide.

Actually, it is not entirely true to say
that Jesus gave no clearer an answer than that.
He didn't give a yes or a no,
but he also didn't only point to what was happening.
He pointed to what was happening,
and to a vision given in the scriptures,
a vision of what was supposed to happen,
a messianic vision.
And it was a vision we heard tonight
in our reading from the prophet Isaiah.

So Jesus was inviting them to interpret the biblical vision
and see a correlation between that
and what they were seeing before their eyes.
Which, to be fair,
is probably what John the baptiser
was already trying to do.
He too was remembering biblical visions,
visions of fire and axes and winnowing forks,
and thinking that Jesus didn't seem to be ticking those boxes.

But Jesus is pointing to different biblical visions.
And if we are going to be followers of Jesus,
then paying attention to which images from scripture
Jesus chooses to align himself with
or model himself on
is going to be pretty important.
If we don't pay attention to how Jesus reads and interprets scripture,
then we may just end up, with John,
missing what is actually going on
because we were busy looking for something different.

So, knowing that we too are going to be asked those questions,
those John questions about what's going on here
and whether we haven't badly misconstrued the faith,
let's prepare ourselves to bear witness to the way of Jesus,
by listening again to the vision we heard from the prophet Isaiah,
and playing with it in the way Jesus plays with it,

joining the dots from then to now
and finding ourselves invited to interpret the connections.

So, says Jesus,
tell these sceptical questioners, tell John,
what you have seen happening.
Tell him it was like the words of the prophet Isaiah.
Tell him it was like seeing
the parched and dusty land beginning to celebrate
as it welcomed the rain.
Tell him you saw the flowers of peace
breaking through rock-hard ground
that had been burned black by the fires of war and hatred.
Tell him you saw tired and thirsty people breaking into smiles
like the thirsty desert suddenly festive with flowers;
blazing colours – orchid and desert pea –
singing songs of joy as new life bursts forth for them.

Tell John that there was no sign of the scorched earth judgement
he used to talk about.
Instead there was music and song and colour and light,
everything bursting with life and exuberance.
It was like the desert was erupting with life
as rich as the Barrier Reef,
as majestic as Kakadu, as lush as the Daintree.
Tell John it was like the glory of the Lord was on display;
the splendour and magnificence of our God.

Tell John you saw people being changed
and their fears dissolving and blowing away.
You saw people whose hands were trembling
break into smiles
and become strong and confident and relaxed.
You saw people whose knees were knocking
get to their feet, and stand firm and assured.
You saw those who had always been fearing the worst
because all their lives they had been told
that they were a mistake, an abomination,
a danger to goodness and truth and values;
you saw them coming back to life
as they tasted God's extravagant love
and experienced perfect love casting out all fear,
and their courage flooding back,
confident that God is with them,
that God loves them,
that God really really likes them,
just as they are.

And you can tell John that I left out that line
about God coming with vengeance,
and with terrifying pay-back.
I don't know where Isaiah got that idea from,
but nobody gets everything right, do they?

Tell John all about what you saw happening to people.

Tell him that eyes long blinded
by fear and shame and humiliation
are open to colour and light!
Tell him that ears long deaf,
unable to hear anything but judgement and condemnation
are now hearing music and laughter
and songs of love!
Tell him that people crippled by hatred and hostility,
who trudged painfully under heavy loads of anxiety,
are breaking free and dancing like broilgas!
People long silenced
by deathly voices of authority
that told them they were wrong
and they knew nothing,
are now singing like lyrebirds!
Tell John about that!

Tell John that you saw everything transforming before your eyes.
You saw the old dusty deserts of judgement
soaking up reviving rains of grace,
and begin to flow with rivers of love.
You saw the hard-baked salt pans of condemnation
become inland lakes of mercy and acceptance
as cool water came gushing up between scorching rocks.
You saw water birds flocking
where only dingoes had scavenged,
and luscious soft fruits growing
where only the toughest mulga scrub
had eked out a stingy existence.

Tell John that instead of a hidden narrow path
that only a special few can ever find,
you saw a new highway, well lit,
and with entry ramps from every direction,
a highway leading straight to God,
a highway on which no one – not even a complete moron –
could ever lose their way.

Tell John that there are no hidden dangers along that road;
no snakes lying in wait at the side;
no nasty law enforcement officers

trying to catch you out and cancel your licence
for breaching some obscure law or secret rule.
Nothing threatening is found on that road,
and everyone is invited by God
to leave behind the potholed roads of Struggle Street
and travel in safety on God's new highway.

Tell John that you saw it all coming true;
that you could see that the Lord had bailed out
all who had been exiled and homeless and locked up,
and that they were coming home,
singing and dancing and celebrating
as they headed for the great party
on God's festive mountain.

Tell John you could see
that the smiles will never leave their faces again.
Laughter and contentment will be theirs to keep,
and misery and despair and fear will be made redundant.

I know it is not what John was expecting,
but tell him it is so much better,
so much more exciting and liberating and life-giving.

It's not what a lot of the religious people were expecting.
Too many of them thought it was all about them.
They thought that God only wanted a special few – them –
and that God would gladly fry the rest.
A lot of them even seemed
to be looking forward to watching that.
Not sure which part of "love your neighbour"
they didn't understand.

Too many of them seemed to think
that God's love was a scarce commodity
that was measured out in miserly handfuls
to only those who could somehow keep their beliefs
and their behaviours within tightly confined limits,
and dourly avoid risks and mistakes
so as to keep from getting any black marks
against their names,
as if God actually bothered keeping score.

Those religious types will likely get their noses
well and truly out of joint
over what I'm doing now
and what you are seeing happening here.
But I think John will probably understand.

It wasn't what he expected,
But he has a good record
when it comes to recognising when things are wrong,
seeing that God's doing something new,
and doing the necessary about-face.
About-faces are kind of his signature tune.

I'm not so sure about some of these others though.
They're forever getting shocked and scandalised and hostile
whenever the grace of God
breaks through the fences they've erected
and the walls they've built,
or whenever God doesn't single them out
for special favouritism.
Never mind.
I'll keep inviting them.
Maybe one day they will come and join us
instead of crucifying me
for inviting the people they'd blacklisted.

Go tell John what you've seen
– Isaiah's vision bursting to life
with love and joy and freedom.
And how good it will be
for those who realise what I'm up to
and don't get their noses out of joint over it.