

“FOLLOWING THE KING - 26”
Matthew 11:1-19

The last couple of sections of Matthew’s Gospel, which we’re working our way through on Sunday mornings, have been pretty tough going. Jesus has been commissioning his twelve apostles, getting them ready to be sent out on the road with the amazing message of the Kingdom of God. They’ve been given Jesus’ authority, promised the help of his Holy Spirit and warned of the dangers that they are likely to face. And last week we saw that nothing is to stand in the way of their commitment to Jesus. He is to be their absolute priority – even coming before considerations of friends and family when there is any conflict of interest. Those words really put some of us through the wringer and reminded us again that, when it comes to Jesus, neutrality is not an option – you have to make a choice: and for those who claim to follow Jesus, you’ve got to be totally focussed on him.

But we are all human, aren’t we? How can we possibly live up to the example that these biblical giants of the faith set for us? What happens when things don’t go as we want them to and we find ourselves at the very end of our resources, when we start to doubt whether we did make the right decision? Well, this morning’s part of the story brings John into view again – John, the great prophet, the mighty preacher, the one of whom Jesus says here (in *v11*), “*among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist*”. John, who is starting to have his doubts. There’s a lot of encouragement in this passage – and, as always, a challenge to us as well.

Of course, as we have said so often, we are looking at these things with the benefit of two thousand years of scholarship and history. Whether we are Christians who believe it all or sceptics who look at it all simply as stories, we know what to expect. John, Matthew and the other apostles didn’t know what to expect: it was all startlingly new to them and no doubt filled them with wonder and amazement.

Well, I say they didn’t know what to expect – that’s not quite true. The Jews did know what to expect, but maybe weren’t quite ready for it. You see, what Jesus was doing was fulfilling the prophecies about the coming Kingly Messiah, the One anointed by God. The Jews had been waiting for the promised Messianic age for hundreds of years, but maybe they had got tired of waiting or perhaps they were rather fed up with the antics of all the other messianic pretenders and thought that Jesus was just another one of them. Whatever their thoughts, as we have seen already in this Gospel, there were many who tried to discount what Jesus was doing and approached him with a very critical and sceptical frame of mind. But it was all there in places such as *Isaiah 35:5,6*: “*Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.*” And *Isaiah 61:1ff* “*The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour and the day of vengeance of our God.*” The Messiah, the one whom God had anointed with his Holy Spirit, would arrive with a powerful message of good news, he would heal the sick, bring sight to the blind and introduce a new ethic of justice and righteousness – all the things that we have seen Jesus is doing in his ministry so far.

Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, is among them. He has been foretold by the prophets, preachers and poets of the Old Testament era and, right up until the present time, there have been those who pointed towards him as they preached. John the Baptist had come to announce that the Messiah’s arrival was imminent and he continued the preaching tradition of the old covenant – a message of judgement and repentance. Jesus has now arrived to complement that message with the words of salvation and wholeness, and acts of healing and liberation.

Unfortunately, John is now in prison. We know from elsewhere (*Matthew 14:3*) that he has made the mistake of telling the King exactly what he thinks of his behaviour and has not found a great deal of favour with him. It’s difficult to work out exactly how long John has been in prison at this point, but it is clear that he has not been able to experience all the good things that Jesus has been doing. What’s more,

he probably feels a bit unsure about his position if God has called him to proclaim this message of the coming Messiah and then allowed him to be imprisoned. Maybe he's got it all wrong and Jesus isn't quite who he thought he was.

So John sends a few of his own disciples to Jesus with the question "*Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?*" It's a fair enough question and one which many people ask – many Christians ask it when they are having doubts about their faith and their circumstances. And let's not try to skirt around this – many Christians do have doubts. Experiences come upon us that make us question what it's all about: why is God letting this happen to me? why am I not getting the blessing that others are getting? is it me or is it God? Some people, who are always very secure in their faith can be very unfeeling towards those who are struggling, and we must beware of adding to other people's problems by blaming it all on them.

Because Jesus doesn't reply, "Go back and tell John to pull himself together. All he's got to do is believe." Jesus continues to do his miraculous works and says, "*Go back and report to John what you hear and see.*" Then he lists all those things which validate his claim to Messiahship. "*The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor.*" Look, you've seen it with your own eyes. Just go and tell John all about it and he will see that I am speaking the truth and I am actually who I claim to be. These are the marks of the Kingly Messiah's activity, the sure signs of God's Holy Spirit breaking into the world – just as Isaiah had predicted and Jesus had said himself in the synagogue at Nazareth (*Luke 4:16-19*).

We're not told of John's response, because Jesus goes on to commend John as the greatest person ever born among women. But there's plenty in what Jesus has said and done to convince him of the reality of his own message and the arrival of the Messianic age.

We, today, live in a world where people are constantly asking questions about Jesus – directly and indirectly. Who is this Jesus? What is being a Christian all about? What do you believe? What can Jesus do for me? And the more usual questions – If there is a God, what's he doing? Why is the world in the state it is? How can we get out of this mess? They are the questions which people ask us and which we bring to Christ. "How are we to answer them?" we ask. "What is our response to this searching? How can we show them that you ARE the answer?"

And our response is often so weak and ineffective as we try to help others make sense of the world and make sense of Jesus. Why? Well, all sorts of reasons, some of which we've explored as we've been looking at this gospel: but part of the reason, I believe, is that when we "*Go back and report what we hear and see ...*" we don't always have a great deal to say. We don't actually see and hear a great deal any more, do we? Certainly not in the way that these disciples of John did.

Let me ask you – do you see the signs of the Messianic age, the Kingdom of God, the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the ways that these disciples did? Do you see people being healed, blind people receiving their sight, the good news being preached with power to the poor? Probably not. When you talk to others about Jesus (if, indeed, you do talk to anyone about him), are you able to tell of the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit at work in your life and the lives of others around you? Or do you rely on an apologetic (in every sense of the word) that is based on reasoned argument?

Don't get me wrong – I am not decrying reasoned argument or denying that the Christian faith is an intensely reasonable faith. What I am saying is that we rarely have the opportunity – or the desire – to talk about the experience, the power, the sheer supernatural wonder of God's Holy Spirit in action. Oh yes, we may have second- or third-hand reports from a missionary newsletter about what is happening in some far corner of the world – where it's OK for the Holy Spirit to operate. But when you try to back up your claims that God is still active in the world by talking about revival in China or healings in Uganda or revolutionary righteousness in Latin America, don't you ever wonder why it doesn't happen in Lichfield? Maybe you don't – but I'm starting to wonder.

If one of my friends, who is very sceptical about Christianity, asks me about how I can tell that God is real, that Jesus is who he said he was, that the Holy Spirit is more than a figment of the imagination, it doesn't cut a great deal of ice if I say, "Well, we've had a few more people coming to our services recently, and we've got a music group." But if I were to be able to say, "Well, people are being healed of serious illnesses; and when the preacher has finished, men and women are acknowledging their sin and changing their lives; and there are exciting things happening in the field of social justice now," that might encourage him at least to come and have a look at what's going on.

I have a sneaking suspicion, though, that if such things did begin to happen, we would have a similar response to that which Jesus caricatures at the end of this section. The people pilloried John the Baptist because he had an austere regime of fasting and teetotalism. Then Jesus came along and showed he liked a good meal and a bit of a drink, so they pilloried him as well. You really couldn't win with them because they had an answer for everything.

And so do we, don't we? We pray for revival – at least, some people used to: you don't hear it much these days – then when it looks as if something might happen that might lead to revival we dismiss it out of hand because it doesn't quite tie in with our neatly prescribed ideas of what revival ought to be. Someone is healed, but we find all kinds of ways of explaining it away as a result of medicine, psychological factors and so on. (And then we go on praying that people would be healed!) We want God to move in our times of worship, but arrange them so neatly that he has no opportunity to work at all (with the excuse that it's more comfortable for visitors!).

It's a bit like supporting Southampton, isn't it? I used to go and watch them week by week with around 20,000 others. We'd stand on the terraces and sing our hearts out, always hoping for a trophy or a place in Europe, but never really expecting it. We come to church hoping that God will move, but we never expect it. I bet that when you come out on Sunday morning you say to those who are still at home, "I'll be back about half twelve, as usual." When was the last time you said, "I might be home by one at the latest, but if something special happens, I'll be a bit later."

The truth is, that if we did come to church and God moved among us in such a way that stuff happened, we wouldn't have time to finish our preparation for tomorrow, or we wouldn't be home in time for lunch or some other planned Sunday activity. There's a greater desire for our own order and tidiness than there is for God's agenda. I am as guilty of that as the next person and I struggle with it. It would be great to be able "*to report what we hear and see*" to the other parents at the school gate on Monday morning, or to a colleague in the staff canteen or to the person on the next machine at the gym. It would be wonderful to have people coming in here on Sundays because they knew that God was at work here, rather than because that's what they always did on Sunday.

Jesus promised his first apostles the Holy Spirit and we are still actually in the season of Pentecost in the Church's calendar, a time when we remember that God's Holy Spirit moved in extraordinary power in the lives of his people. Now Pentecost was a very special day and there are aspects of it which make it a "one-off" occasion. But I do not believe that it was a "one-off" in the sense that the Holy Spirit can no longer empower his people today. Let me encourage you to pray for renewal and revival here in Lichfield – tomorrow's our monthly Day of Prayer: what better time to be thinking of this. Pray that we will have something to report. Dare pray that we will be stirred up by the Holy Spirit so that the signs of the present Messianic age, the marks of the Kingdom of God are visible to all in this church and in this community. And tonight is *At His Feet*. On the last occasion that happened, two separate people had very similar words from God that we are on the verge of an outpouring of his Holy Spirit on us.

At the end of Mark's Gospel, we read that "*the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it.*" Now, I don't know about your interpretation of the Bible, but I have a sneaking suspicion that "*the signs that accompanied*

it” were not people receiving a copy of *Journey into Life* or signing up for an Alpha Course (not that there’s anything at all wrong with those). I reckon that those “*signs*” are a bit more powerful than that.

So often in church life – and I’m not talking simply about Wade Street Church – all our talk about progress is seen in terms of numbers and premises and programmes. That’s fine and has its place. But I would love to see progress being made in this city as we experience more and more of the supernatural power of God’s Holy Spirit, as we grow deeper in our knowledge of God and our experience of his Holy Spirit. Do you want that too? Let’s pray for God to move in ways that mean that people asking the question, “*Is Jesus the one?*” – whether they are Christians starting to wonder if they’ve got it all wrong or people who are not yet Christians searching for meaning in their lives – can see that this is all true. Then we might be able to go and “*report what we hear and see*” with real enthusiasm and excitement.

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How can we possibly live up to the example that these apostles set for us? What happens when things don't go as we want them to and we find ourselves at the very end of our resources, when we start to doubt whether we did make the right decision? Here John, the great prophet, the mighty preacher, the one of whom Jesus says "*among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist*" is starting to have his doubts. Unfortunately, he is now in prison. We know from elsewhere (*Matthew 14:3*) that he has made the mistake of telling the King exactly what he thinks of his behaviour and has not found a great deal of favour with him. He sends a few of his own disciples to Jesus with the question "*Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?*" Jesus continues to do his miraculous works and says, "*Go back and report to John what you hear and see.*" Then he lists all those things which validate his claim to Messiahship.

We live in a world where people are constantly asking questions about Jesus – directly and indirectly. Who is this Jesus? What is being a Christian all about? What do you believe? What can Jesus do for me? If there is a God, what's he doing? Why is the world in the state it is? And our response is often so weak and ineffective as we try to help others make sense of the world and make sense of Jesus. Part of the reason is that when we "*Go back and report what we hear and see ...*" we don't always have a great deal to say.

We rarely have the opportunity – or the desire – to talk about the experience, the power, the sheer supernatural wonder of God's Holy Spirit in action. When we try to back up our claims that God is still active in the world by talking about revival in China or healings in Uganda or revolutionary righteousness in Latin America, don't you ever wonder why it doesn't happen in Lichfield?

We pray for revival, then when it looks as if something might happen that might lead to revival we dismiss it because it doesn't quite tie in with our neatly prescribed ideas of what revival ought to be. Someone is healed, but we find all kinds of ways of explaining it away. We want God to move in our times of worship, but arrange them so neatly that he has no opportunity to work at all. So often in church life all our talk about progress is seen in terms of numbers and premises and programmes. There's a greater desire for our own order and tidiness than there is for God's agenda.

Let us pray for renewal and revival here in Lichfield. Dare to pray that we will be stirred up by the Holy Spirit so that the signs of the present Messianic age, the marks of the Kingdom of God are visible to all in this church and in this community. Let's pray for God to move in ways that mean that people asking the question, "*Is Jesus the one?*" – whether they are Christians starting to wonder if they've got it all wrong or people who are not yet Christians searching for meaning in their lives – can see that this is all true.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do we find it difficult to deal with doubt as Christians? Have you had times when you have doubted? How did you resolve that?
2. What are "*the things which validate Jesus' claim to Messiahship*"?
3. What kind of questions do people ask you about Jesus and your faith? How do you respond?
4. Why do you think we do not see miraculous things happening amongst us today?
5. What do you understand by "revival"? Would you like to be part of it? Why/why not?
6. Pray together for God to work unmistakably in Lichfield – in ways that will change people's attitude to Jesus.