

## **“THE KING IS COMING -2”**

*John 1:19-34*

Last week, you may recall, we looked back into the Old Testament at one of the familiar prophecies about the coming of Jesus. In the familiar words of *Isaiah 9* we read of the “*Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father [and] Prince of Peace*” who was given human form in Jesus the Christ, the Kingly Messiah. And, as we know – and you can check out if you look back into the later books of the Old Testament – there were several other prophets who also pointed forward to the coming of Jesus as God’s Anointed and as the one who would inaugurate God’s promised Kingdom, who would usher in that sovereign rule of God.

And what we have read this morning introduces John – John the Baptist. He is the one who came to herald the actual arrival of Jesus on earth. He is considered by many to be the last in the tradition of the Old Testament prophets – although not “*The Prophet*” of *Deuteronomy 18*, who would have Messianic credentials and who the priests and Levites thought might have now come in the form of John (v21). John was the prophet who could actually, literally, point to Jesus. As Jesus strode into view where John was preaching just outside Bethany, John was able to direct his listeners’ gaze towards him – “*Look, the Lamb of God ...*” And as John announces the coming of his cousin Jesus in the words we’ve just read, he speaks like the preachers of the Old Testament in prophetic paradoxes. We said last week that the Bible and Christian theology seem to be full of paradoxes – ideas that seem to be mutually exclusive, things that initially we can’t quite hold together in our minds. There are three here that we’ll reflect on this morning.

In v26 John tells his listeners that Jesus is “*one you do not know*”. The figure whom he is heralding is unknown to the people of Israel. They don’t seem to have a clue who he is and they appear not to be expecting him at all. And yet, paradoxically, the coming of Jesus has been prophesied for centuries. Back well beyond the time of Isaiah and his fellow preachers – right back to the time of Adam and Eve’s exclusion from the Garden of Eden, in fact – God had been telling people that he would send someone to rectify the mess into which the world was descending. And Isaiah and the others had given some fairly clear indications of what to look for in this coming Kingly Messiah.

Now Jesus arrives and, as we have been seeing in Matthew’s account of his life, Jesus fits all the criteria that have been set out for this figure. Admittedly, it’s a bit early in the story for John’s listeners to have seen all that Jesus is and does, but the fact of the matter is that over the centuries people’s expectations of the Messiah have changed. They have started imposing on him their own ideas. Isaiah and the others have given some clear ideas of what to look for, but the Prince of Peace has changed in people’s minds to being a liberator and a military figure. The Light of the World has become for them a beacon for Israel alone. They have created a Messiah who fits their own expectations rather than expecting a Messiah who has been promised by God. So they don’t recognise him. They don’t know this figure who should be easily identifiable and known by all.

Like so many of these things, it still happens. We have created a Jesus who fits our own ideas, our own desires. The figure of Jesus has been hi-jacked over the years by all sorts of people and all kinds of ideas from revolutionary Marxists to market-led capitalists, from liberal interfaith gurus to swivel-eyed right-wing fundamentalists. And despite the evidence we have in the Bible and in the world around us we still fail to recognise him. For so many people, the God who is revealed in Jesus is completely unknown. In *Romans 1:20*, Paul writes this: “*For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.*” That goes for those who have yet to discover Jesus at all and for those of us who claim to have discovered him and committed ourselves to him, but don’t always realise quite what we’ve let ourselves in for. That’s why we need books with titles like *What If Jesus Really Meant What He Said?*

Let's pause for a moment and ask God's forgiveness that we are so reluctant to accept God as he is and to accept what Jesus has to say as being worth following, that we are often so blind to who he is and what he asks of us. As his disciples, we do claim to know this Jesus, so let's think and act as if we really do take him seriously.

### **Music/Prayer of Confession**

When we were looking at chapter 11 of Matthew's Gospel, you may remember that Jesus referred to John by saying, "*Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist*" (Matthew 11:11). John was a great figure in Jesus' estimation and he is a towering figure in the story of the Gospels. But here John says that even his is not worthy to untie the thongs of Jesus' sandals. That was (and still is, I imagine) a pretty menial task. Although disciples would perform all kinds of services for their rabbinic teachers, it was expressly forbidden for them to loose the thongs of sandals, so demeaning was it considered to be. So John, this great figure, endorsed by Jesus Christ himself, is way inferior to the Kingly Messiah. Jesus is an even greater figure, one who we discover is worthy of all honour and power and glory as we read on in the New Testament. We shall soon be singing in our Christmas carols that Jesus is "*God of God*", that he is God come down among us. Paul tells us in *Philippians 2:6* that he is "*in very nature God*".

And yet, Paul goes on to say that, "*he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself.*" This awesome figure who stepped off the golden pavements of heaven into the dusty lanes of Galilee, who relinquished the splendour and majesty of the throne room of God for the poverty and fragility of broken humanity, ended up not only loosing the sandals of his disciples but washing their feet. This dazzling Light of the world and Commander of heavenly hosts was tied up and beaten by rough Roman soldiers. This Son of God who had been there as the universe was called into being and who helped create a world of trees and animals was nailed to one of his own trees by a bunch of people who appeared to know nothing about the person they were crucifying.

Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, indentified with broken and hopeless humanity to bring us healing and hope. The one who made us serves us. The one whose purity and holiness are beyond anything we can even begin to understand, took on the vulnerability and the limitations of our race in order to liberate us and restore us – to bring us home to God. Yes, he was a King – but a humble King, the like of which has never been seen before, nor will ever be seen again. Let's thank God for that in song – and then respond in humbly offering ourselves.

**Song – *Oh, kneel me down again* (11am also *From heaven you came*)**

### **Offering**

This vulnerable, fragile human being came into our world and behaved like a servant. In many respects he was just like one of us – that was, after all, part of God's plan. He wept, he laughed, he was tired, he got hungry, he was tempted, he was scared, he bled, he died. As he walked towards John the Baptist and his little knot of listeners down by the river at Bethany he would have looked like any other Palestinian peasant. He talked their language – although with an impressive sense of authority. He shared their lives. He was, as Paul said, "*made in human likeness. And ... found in appearance as a man.*"

And yet, John points him out here as "*The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*" He is human, all right: but he's also sinless. He was tempted as humans are, but he never gave in. He died, as humans do, but he burst back to life. He needed to be completely sinless to be able to effect God's plan of salvation for all men and women. This is how the writer of *The Letter to the Hebrews* puts it:

*"Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully*

*human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people ... For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” (Hebrews 2:14-17; 4:15,16)*

Somehow, in a glorious way that we can never really fully understand, through Jesus God has made possible the restoring of our relationship with him. We can be liberated from that “*fear of death*” which we spoke about last week. We can know hope for the eternal future. We can begin to live that life of fulfilment and satisfaction right here and now as we become followers of the Kingly Messiah, citizens of the Kingdom of God, people whose lives have been transformed by an encounter with the unexpected Jesus, the humble King, the Saviour of the world.