



11th December 2016
Isaiah 35-10
Matthew 11.2-11

Asking Questions

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In

Jesus' name. Amen.

On December 13th 1903, near Kitty Hawk in North Carolina, the Wright brothers made aviation history. They flew in a controlled plane for the first time.

At the end of a stupendous and historic day they sent a telegraph message back home to their sister Katherine in Dayton.

It read:

Success four flights Thursday morning.

All against twenty-one-mile wind.

Started from level with engine power only.

Average speed through the air thirty-one miles.

Longest Flight 57 seconds.

Inform Press.

Home Christmas.

Katherine dutifully took the message to the local Dayton Paper and the duty editor read it. 'How nice', he said.

The next day's banner headline read: Wright brothers home for Christmas.

He sort of missed the point somewhat! Instead of breaking the news of the world's first powered flight, he missed the journalistic scoop of a lifetime and told the good folks of Dayton that two neighbourhood lads would be back in town for the holidays!

Is that, I wonder, what John the Baptist was doing in today's reading? Missing the point.

Jesus was transforming peoples' lives. Yet John seems to miss all of this.

Is that because he once stood on the banks of the Jordan preaching about God breaking in with fiery judgment, pitchfork in hand and axe at the ready. But in the message of Jesus, his cousin, where was the pitchfork and the fire?

Jesus is healing. Jesus is teaching. Peoples' lives are being changed for the better. Yet not for Jesus the same judgemental tone in his preaching as John. And John misses the fire and the pitchfork – and in doing so does he also miss the breaking in of the Kingdom of Heaven?

So, he sends word to Jesus with the intriguing and poignant question: Are you the one or should we look for another?

John was not alone in asking this question in those days. Although not all Jewish communities around him were looking for a Messiah figure or gearing themselves up for the end time, the highly influential Qumran community was - and they too thought like John that this Messiah figure would be a fiery 'end time' agent and Jesus, quite simply didn't fit the bill!

On Tuesday evening last week some of us attended an interfaith evening at Chesham Mosque. As ever we were welcomed with exemplary hospitality and it was a joy to engage in dialogue with fellow seekers after truth from both the Islamic and Jewish traditions as we considered the story of Christmas from a Christian, Muslim and Jewish viewpoint.

I suppose the subtext for the evening was rather similar to John's enquiry from prison – is the Jesus of Bethlehem the one, or should we look for another?

In so many ways John's question from prison is as relevant today as it was the first time he asked it.

This Advent we have begun a new church year and the gospel which will be read most in congregations throughout the world over the next twelve months will be Matthew. And Matthew is in no doubt how to answer John's questions. In a way, it's obvious why he includes this story of a wobbly John in his gospel. It gives Matthew, the protagonist, an opportunity to affirm with all the certainty he can muster that this Jesus was, in his view, the 'real thing'.

A lot has happened since John first stood on the banks of the Jordan preaching with such conviction in Matthew 3 to this point in chapter 11 when he starts to question those convictions.

In Matthew chapters 5-7 there is that iconic Christian teaching so beloved of Gandhi, The Sermon on the Mount. The radical, upside down teaching of Jesus which became such a threat to the status quo. And those words of Jesus are followed in Matthew 8-9 with a summary of his deeds as he heals the official's son, cures the man lowered in through the roof and makes better the haemorrhaging woman.

William Loader – Erna referred to him the other week as our favourite commentator – has done some fascinating work on the miracles of Matthew 8-9 and concludes that every single one is a fulfilment of specific prophecies in Isaiah.

Until pointed out that's lost on us but presumably not on Matthew's first readers. As they heard of each miracle many would straight away have drawn that important connection – this Jesus is fulfilling the prophecies uttered seven hundred years ago, by the authors of Isaiah in the Jewish scriptures.

No, Matthew seems in little doubt that Jesus is the real thing!

But the truth is that such certainty wasn't inevitably felt by everyone at the time of Jesus' ministry. It isn't today. We all know that even in our families there will be some of us who are approaching Christmas wanting worship to be a central part of our celebrations because faith in this Jesus of Bethlehem means the world to us – and like Matthew we have come to the conclusion he is the real thing. Yet such convictions may not necessarily be held by those we love and with whom we willingly spend this season.

Back in the days of Jesus and John there was great uncertainty about what was developing out of Judaism. No doubt these were exciting times but they were also confusing.

Different sects within Judaism had a variety of expectations about Messiahship that collided – there simply wasn't just one accepted standard job description on offer - yet there was an abundance of mavericks around all claiming to be the perfect candidate.

Obviously at one point some Jews looked at John the Baptist and thought he might be the one. It's for that reason he has to back off, disillusion them and say he wasn't even worthy to untie Jesus' sandals.

In their book, *First Christmas*, Marcus Borg and John Crossen, talk of John's call to 'repent'. They look at the Greek roots of this word which mean: to go beyond the mind that you have. In other words, to develop a new way of seeing, a new mind-set. In their view repent means to begin seeing differently.

Could it just be that these cousins looked for God's activity in our world in different places and activities.

For, on the surface maybe it seems plausible to conclude that John and Jesus had two views, two schemes of how this coming Kingdom of heaven was going to touch earth.

John's was the more aggressive. For him God was coming as a judge.

Jesus' strikes a more compassion note and the presence of God among us is made manifest as people are offered wholeness, peace and hope.

Did these cousins split over the issue of divine vengeance? Is Matthew just saying to us in chapter 11 John was simply wrong?

I suspect we probably don't know enough to be sure either way. It's just one more example of how complex and passionate anyone's search for truth can become. And perhaps when Marx wrote 'religion is the opiate of the masses' he wasn't too far wide of the mark.

There is, of course, a tradition that at one time Jesus was himself to be counted, or at least identified, with John's disciples. This was an emerging progressive sect within Judaism and its leader was a family member; why wouldn't Jesus give this movement his support?.

Yet he had to emerge from the shadows and maybe that's what this part of Matthew is all about.

In the end the Jesus' story is bigger than John's and John's part in the narrative has to become subordinate to Jesus' central role.

And that shifting of the centre was perhaps a tricky moment for these cousins.

In today's painting by Navarrete, the 16th century mute artist from Spain, we sense something of the possible dejection John feels now he is no longer in the limelight.

This was a man who drew crowds and with his extreme dress and odd diet would it be ungenerous to view him as a rather thespian final prophet in the Old Testament tradition?

Yet since his arrest there are no more crowds around him, no throng to hear his sermons, no river in which to plunge the repentant. He is cut off, isolated and alone.

And in the night come the questions and in the silence the doubts grow. Sound familiar?

Yet, don't be fooled because indifference is the opposite of faith, not doubting.

Doubting is all about still searching, still questioning, still yearning for truth and integrity of belief.

Doubt has an honourable tradition within faith. Never be ashamed of your doubts.

Yet the question for John and for us is: what do we do with these doubts?

I like what the leaflet says to us today. It makes this simple yet profound point – let me quote it to you: In his doubt and uncertainty John turns to Jesus not away from him. Why not underline that sentence when you get home! In his doubt and uncertainty John turns to Jesus not away from him.

Perhaps like you I have many questions about faith. I don't understand the idea of God made man at the Incarnation, I can no longer think of prayer as one function but a myriad of possibilities, and to be truthful the ideas behind Easter I find even more complicated than Advent.

But somehow when I sing:
 Love came down at Christmas, Love all lovely, love divine;
 love was born at Christmas, star and angels gave the sign.

Somehow, I think I start to understand the meaning of that word repent as I try to see things differently, and even with my doubts and questions I'm still wanting to turn towards Jesus not away from him.

So how did Jesus answer John's question: Are you the one?

Characteristically he doesn't give him a yes or no answer! Theology is never that simple!!

Instead he says – Look John, peoples' lives are being changed – the Kingdom of heaven is breaking in.

Where, I wonder, do we expect to find God at work? And just as important a question is: How do we expect to experience God at work?

Jesus, as it were, throws the question back to John. It's rhetorical! Isn't God at work when the blind recover their sight, when the deaf hear and the poor are brought good news? Isn't this what the Kingdom is about: compassionate transformation – isn't it still what the Kingdom is about.

So shouldn't we rejoice this morning that our Junior Church have been involved in Radio Christmas and that as a church in 2016 we have raised £7000 for Street Kids Direct? Rejoice that God is at work every time Sycamore Club meets. Rejoice that AFC creates community through our Morning Congregation, Women's Own, LunchBreak and Tea at Three. That we offer our building so that children can meet with a non-resident parent through the Contact Centre.

Isn't every one of those activities signs that the Kingdom of heaven is among us? The presence of God found in compassionate transformation.

It's as if Jesus was saying to John: Don't miss the signs cousin, that which was broken is being redeemed and restored – don't despair: God is at work.

A couple of weeks ago, whilst I was on retreat a session in the chapel went wrong. Our leader that afternoon couldn't play a piece of music on her CD player because the disc was scratched. It was the hymn, played by a saxophone: Let all mortal flesh keep silence. Although disappointed by the technical hitch she pressed on – but we all knew something was now missing from her presentation. In the gloom of a November afternoon one of the retreatants went to the back of the chapel and found a hymn book, turned to that hymn and asked the leader if she could sing it for the group.

Her beautiful solo voice pieced the darkness. As she sang the verses with such exquisite phrases it was as if she was gathering up all the broken pieces and making the session whole again. That spontaneous offering redeemed and restored a broken situation and became a living parable illustrating the Advent message of hope in Jesus.

My friends we are about to enter the second half of our Advent journey. Don't miss God at work in our world today. And learn from Jesus' answer to John: Whenever and however we see compassionate transformation rejoice that the Kingdom of Heaven is once again touching earth – and thank God that he is still at work among us and through us.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Ian Green, Amersham, 9th December 2016