

MATTHEW 11:2-10  
WAITING... FOR WHAT?

How did you react when I didn't appear from the vestry at the beginning of the service? I'm afraid it was deliberate! Normally, I'm right behind Chas as we come into Church together, but today I didn't! How did that feel? Waiting can be awkward! It makes us feel uncertain; we're not sure what to do next. We're not even sure if something has gone wrong; has minister turned ill or simply run away? So we can be bemused, an awkward silence as people try to compute the situation and what's going on; we feel uneasy at having to wait longer than usual; should we sit down, even though minister hasn't come in? What were you expecting might happen? Were you hoping that I will appear and quickly? Waiting like that is not a pleasant experience and we don't like it! It was less than 10 seconds, but I'm sure it felt longer.

Even worse is waiting only to be disappointed when the thing happens. I like to think you'd be disappointed if you were waiting at the start of the service for me to appear and then someone else appeared! Let's not push that too far! As I was talking earlier about the buses and my delight when the bus appeared along Lanark Rd, only to be quickly disappointed when it was full and went straight past the stop; waiting with expectation and hope turned quickly to disappointment and more unease – will there be another bus? I was waiting for bus on Tuesday night in town and had to wait 20 minutes when a 44 came, only to discover that it was ending at Gillespie Crossroads; there was a tinge of disappointment, but I took it because can walk from there and there was no guarantee that another will come. It did! So we wait, with expectations that are either high or low.

John the Baptist is a key figure in the story of Jesus. Luke's story of Jesus begins with the story about John and the promise of a son to an old man called Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth; they had no children and the angel came to Zechariah, the priest in the temple, to tell him that Elizabeth would have a son called John who would be Messiah's messenger. Zechariah wasn't too keen to believe, so the angel struck him dumb till the day his son was born. When he got his voice back, he rejoiced that God had given His people a strong Saviour! When all the gospel writers begin to tell the story of Jesus' ministry, they all begin with John. In one way or another, John is there at the start of Jesus' ministry, the strong voice in the desert, calling people to repent of their sins and promising that God will judge His people: *"the axe..." (Matthew 3:10f)* John baptised Jesus and so began Jesus' God-given ministry in the world.

John is no shrinking violet. Call a spade a spade would our John! So when Herod seduced his brother's wife and then married her, John told Herod that it was all wrong; he told the Herod how many sins he had committed. Herod was furious and as people with power tend to do, he had John arrested and thrown into prison for telling the truth. So by time we read Matthew chapter 11, John is in prison and his followers are still visiting him. Then comes the question: *"When Jn..." (11:2)* Some people think that John sent his disciples to Jesus so that they could see what Jesus was doing; that it was for their benefit that he asked this question so that they could discover Jesus for themselves. But actually there is another, better explanation. John had waited for Messiah, had spoken about Messiah in terms of fire and judgment, had expected Messiah to exercise that kind of ministry, but Jesus' ministry had been very different. Maybe there is a sense of unease in John, a sense of disappointment, maybe, that Jesus hasn't turned out in quite the way John expected. He hesitates to believe because Messiah is not quite what he had expected Him to be.

If you read pieces like Isaiah 60, you can see why. Isaiah talks about a glorious age that will come and this is clearly a promise of Messiah. It is all about light and the glory of the Lord dawning on people of Israel. It goes on to describe a period of wealth and prosperity centred on Israel when Messiah comes and the nations will be drawn to this One who will come. Anyone reading these words imagines that a great King will come to reign and will inaugurate a kingdom full of power and glory. Many people, perhaps John included, thought that Messiah would gather a great army together and attack the Romans and throw them out of Israel and so the Jews would be free again. John saw none of that happening when Jesus came and perhaps was disappointed; “we had thought that He was Messiah, but maybe we were wrong!” So the question – “*are you...*” (11:3)

Expectations are strange things, because they're not always rational! We have all kinds of expectations: of ourselves, of other people, of Church, of Jesus, of God. The expectations we have of ourselves can either be way too high or incredibly low; we beat ourselves up because we've not fulfilled what we expect of ourselves, when in fact we almost expect perfection. The same can be said of what we expect of other people: we expect behaviour or attitudes of others that we're not prepared to expect of ourselves when we want others to be perfect and in the same breath want them to be accepting of our faults; it doesn't ring true somehow. We expect “Church” to be perfect and to provide all that we want and need and when Church gets it wrong, we're hyper-critical while not prepared to accept that Church is made up of people just like us. What are our expectations of Jesus? They can be either so low that we expect nothing and dismiss Him; or so high that we expect Him to intervene immediately in supreme power in each and every situation and when He doesn't we're hugely disappointed. I've painted two extremes deliberately because the reality is somewhere in between. We all have expectations of Jesus; we'll come back to that in a minute.

How does Jesus answer John's question? He could have simply said “Yes” but then we'd only have His word for it and He doesn't do that. Instead, He says this to John's disciples: “*Go back...*” (11:4f) Anyone who knew his Bible (and John certainly did) would know what this is all about. See what Jesus is doing! He is helping all of these people in all of these different ways – the blind, the lame etc – and this is not simply Jesus telling John how good a person He is. He is telling John that He is Messiah! There is another glorious piece in Isaiah, chapter 35 this time, in which the prophet paints a great picture of the joy that the people of God will have when God's Messiah comes: the desert will be glad, the wilderness rejoice, weak knees will be steadied and God will come. When that happens: “*Then will...*” (Isaiah 35:5) “So, John, look at your Bible and you will see another picture of Messiah, a picture in which lives are transformed, people are given what they need and God has come into the world.” I like to think that John died a happy man because he saw what Jesus meant and believed. He could have been in prison thinking that his work had been all in vain; all that he had said and done had been to no avail. There might have been a real sense of disappointment, because Messiah had not turned out to be what John expected and what he thought God had promised. Jesus tells John that He is Messiah, that John's work and waiting has not been in vain, that there is no need to be disappointed because the One for whom John had been the messenger has come and God's Saviour is here. “Keep the faith, John!”

What do we expect of Jesus? What do we expect of Christian faith? That Jesus will make everything right for us all at once, that we can snap our fingers and every hard thing will be removed and our journey through life so smooth? Or that if we believe then all our problems will be over, all our questions will be answered; there will be nothing more to touch, damage, harm, trouble us? On top of that we will be

prosperous and wealthy because that's what God does for the believer! If these are our expectations, we will be disappointed; Jesus never promised these things to us. He did not come to make us rich; He did not promise us a trouble-free life where all is perfect peace. There are some who would try to make you believe that He did; there is a thing called 'the prosperity gospel' especially in the USA in which preachers will tell you that God will make you wealthy and will give you a trouble-free life if you believe.

The Bible draws a very different picture of Jesus: a friend to troubled and needy people; One who loves and cares for people in the midst of the trials of life; One who prays and seeks to do the will of God, no matter the cost; One who will suffer and eventually die a humiliating death on a cross in order to be the Saviour; One who will defeat death in His resurrection; One who will come again in power and glory and bring in a new world, who will create a new heaven and a new earth. If we let the Bible shape our expectations of Jesus, then this is what we should expect Him to be and to do for us. If these are our expectations then we will never be disappointed. Even that last: Christians have expected Jesus to come again to the world for 2000 years and waiting that length of time has left us uneasy; we're not sure that He will fulfil that expectation any more; we're not sure what to expect. Yet, He has promised and He will do it.

It can be frustrating, having to wait. Waiting for a bus that will come, but be full; or for a bus that will never come. Waiting for Christmas when you're a child and it never seems to get any closer. Waiting...waiting... I like to think that John died a happy man, and more a believing man, a man who saw Jesus and was glad. Were there doubts in his mind? Did Jesus fall short of his expectations? Jesus showed John something different – "this is Messiah!" One who came to meet the needs of a troubled world; One who came to save; One who came to suffer and die. This Jesus is God's strong Saviour for our world, for us. Believe in this Jesus and we will never be disappointed. He will give us all we need; He will answer our prayers; He will bless us with the treasures of His grace. Rejoice!