

MATTHEW 11:2-15  
WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Image is a huge issue in our culture. £Billion budgets for advertising agencies is surely a witness to that, creating an image that will sell the product, attracting people to the product in the first place and then to spend money on it. We want to create the right image – this is what lies behind the fashion industry, allowing people to buy clothes that will create the right image - think Ascot hats; the same is true of the cosmetics industry so that people can look in the mirror and see what they would like to see rather than the real face; of the dieting industry – how many dieting books are there because people want to see themselves as the right shape and present the right image. All of this can be hugely damaging – how many, especially young girls, have done themselves harm by trying to conform to the magazine image of their idols and all credit must go to those who have campaigned for images to be real rather than created in a photo-lab! This is about more than pictures: what have we seen this week in Barclays and people have formed an impression of all bankers on the basis of the image that is emerging; no matter how much others will disclaim and say “not us”, an image has been created that will be hard to shift.

I think we really underestimate the power of image and what people see! In Church, we want people to hear a message; we are a “message people” and we want people to hear our message so that faith can be created in their hearts and they will follow Jesus. We work hard to make sure that the message is right and carefully crafted. But people form impressions of Church by what they see as well as, if not before, they hear anything. A Church building with weeds growing out of the gutters, with cracked windows, and paint peeling – what do people see? A group of 35 people gathering for worship in a building that seats 750, one here and one there – what do people see? People who are excited about their faith and look to live out that faith positively and humbly – what do people see? Now, you might not like this idea – and I have to say at outset, that we do not live our lives ‘to be seen’; that is a recipe for disaster – but, we are seen; we make a public profession of loyalty to Jesus by being here or by other Christian involvement and people see us and they will form opinions of us, of Church and of Jesus by what they see, long before they hear anything!

“What do they see?” This is the question at the heart of our reading from Matthew 11 today. It is a fascinating encounter between some friends of John the Baptist and Jesus. John is in prison; he has crossed swords once too often with Herod and the king has thrown him in prison for saying things that Herod didn’t like (the whole story is in chapter 14). But from his prison cell, John keeps an interest in what is going on outside and especially in the ministry of Jesus. He had seen Jesus at His baptism, but maybe their paths had not crossed since; John had kept his own ministry going till Herod put a stop to it. There could be a whole lot of reasons why John sends his friends: was he looking for some kind of reassurance that Jesus is man John thought He was? Was he facing some kind of crisis of faith, with doubts creeping in, that his ministry had been worth all the effort and suffering and that God was doing what He promised? Was John looking to point his friends in the right direction for the day when John was no longer there to help them? We don’t know, but for whatever reason John sent some of his disciples to Jesus with a question.

“Are you...” (*Matthew 11:3*) “The Coming One” – this is a question about the Messiah. John says to Jesus – are you the Messiah, or is there another One who will come? This

question is at the heart of John's whole reason for being, in a sense. He has believed from the day of Jesus' baptism that Jesus is the God-given Messiah, but perhaps there had been expectations that Jesus had not fulfilled, so John has this question. Jesus' answer: "go back..." (v4) "What do you see?" What is the evidence, the proof? "The blind..." (v5) These are the works of Jesus; these are the things Jesus did, the good works for which He had become famous and for which He had a growing reputation. People were talking about the things that Jesus did and were telling stories of what Jesus did and perhaps there were some people around who could give a first-hand account of what Jesus did. The answer to the question is "What do you see?"

What they see is evidence of Jesus' love and compassion for the needs of others, the man who cared for others and did things to help others; they are evidence of His power, that Jesus is able to do these things in way that nobody else before or since has been able to do; they are evidence of the uniqueness of Jesus, that He is an entirely one-off, there is none like Him. But for John these things are evidence of one other reality: Jesus is the God-given Messiah. The way in which Jesus answers the question will take John back to his bible; Jn would know his bible and there are very clear echoes here of passages in Isaiah 35, and 61, about the Messiah who would come from God and would do these things; the One who came fulfilling these prophecies is the God-given Messiah. For Jesus to say to John's disciples "tell him what you see" is to confirm John's faith, to reassure him that he is right: "*Blessed is...*" (v6)

We find the same question again, this time from Jesus about John: "*As John's...*" (11:7) "What did you see?" He gives some answers: "*A reed...*" (11:7bf) Did you see a man who changed his mind with the wind, a weak, pliable person? No! Did you see someone dressed in fine clothes? No! John was famous for what he wore, but it wasn't high fashion! So what did you go to see? A prophet, a man who spoke God's word with power and conviction, a man with courage in his heart to tell people the word of God no matter the cost – he is in prison for that courage! They saw a man whom God had called to exercise a ministry, preparing the way for the coming of the Lord to His people, a ministry that came to its climax when Jesus came. John belonged to the great tradition of Old Testament prophets, telling the word of God bravely and clearly to the people of God; yet there are things that John would never see – he never saw the cross and so never saw the depth of love that God has for the world; he never saw the resurrection and so had no chance to experience the great demonstration of the power of God; he never saw the things that we see of Jesus. He is a prophet, the voice of one calling!

What people see is just such a big issue. People saw Jesus do these marvellous things and that gave Him the opportunity to preach. People saw John and they were drawn to him and that gave him the opportunity to tell people about Jesus. The reality is that not everyone had eyes to see. Some people saw the things Jesus did and closed their hearts: He healed on the Sabbath – the wrong day! Hearts closed! Some saw things Jesus did and said 'He has a devil'; hearts closed! So not everyone who saw what Jesus did believed. Nonetheless, they saw Jesus and they saw His power and His compassion and some believed. People form judgements by what they see. We have a communion service this morning; we will have bread and wine on the table and will re-enact some of what Jesus did on the night before He died. Robert Bruce, was minister of St Giles and in 1589 he preached a famous series of sermons on the sacraments: he describes the sacrament as a "Visible word" "because it conveys the signification of it by the eye to the mind... you will no sooner see the bread with your eye, than the Body of Christ will come into your mind; you will no sooner see the wine than the blood of Christ will come into

your mind.” (p.54) Images and pictures of Jesus have been controversial in the history of the Presbyterian Church in Scotland, yet we live in age where pictures are so often more powerful in people’s hearts and minds than words; what we see can be hugely powerful!

I came across this verse in Titus recently in book I was reading: “*Teach slaves...*” (Titus 2:9,10) It is this notion at end of making the gospel attractive, that I want to tease out for a moment. The word used to talk about making the gospel attractive is the same word which gives us “cosmetic”. “To adorn something or someone so that they are seen to be beautiful and attractive” – is that not what the cosmetics industry is all about. The word “cosmetic” suggests something superficial, but Paul is talking about something far deeper, not something that can be applied in the morning and washed off at night. What makes the gospel attractive? The quality of their lives as slaves, that they are good slaves, hard-working, honest and trustworthy, and when they lives their lives like that as Christian slaves, they make the gospel attractive to their masters and to others who see them!

“Missional magnetism” – there’s an idea, people who make Jesus attractive, who make the gospel attractive, who draw others to Jesus. What do people see in us? There are two parts to the best answer to that question and they need to go together: first of all, they see real people, people who live in the real world, with the same problems, concerns and joys as everyone else; some Christians give the impression that they live on a different plane from others, even different planet! We are real, everyday people. Secondly, we are people who are being transformed by God’s grace, who have new values, who are learning what faith is all about and who are learning to follow Jesus; and that faith and following is transforming our lives and the grace of God has made us new people, people who behave as Jesus teaches, who are eager to do what is good!

What do they see? No matter how much we don’t like question, we must take it seriously; the world will make its judgement on Jesus and the gospel by what it sees in us. So what do they see? Do they see people who take faith seriously, who look to grow their faith and deepen? People for whom worship is hugely important and a great joy? People who love one another and whose deepest joy is to serve one another? People who try to behave in the ways that Jesus teaches and who reject all that is wrong? People who love what is just, honest, true? People who face up to even the most difficult things in life by faith? We might say that all of this is too much, but there is a whole other set of answers to these questions; for every one of these positive qualities there is a negative opposite and where people see the negative opposites they think worse of Jesus and the gospel, and the church has been there so many times. We have faithfully preached the message, but it has not been heard because of what people have seen in the behaviour of Christians!

What do we see? We see Jesus, the Saviour of the world, the Messiah, crucified and risen, One who is able to save completely. We see a man of compassion and love, One who healed the sick, made the blind see; One who loved us and gave His life for us. What do people see in us? Do they see people who make Jesus attractive? Who adorn the gospel by our behaviour? Wordlive is SU’s online Bible study material; on Friday, a comment was posted: “I have a sign on my wardrobe door: ‘today I choose to wear mercy, love and grace!’” Is that what people see in us? Are these the qualities of our lives?