

MATTHEW 11:2-11
WHAT DO YOU SEE?

Expectations are high! They always are at this time of year. Expectations of Christmas are created by the media, TV ads, newspapers – they create an expectation of happy families sitting round the lunch table, happily laughing and sharing a good time together with lots of food; children are opening large presents which they will spend the whole day playing with; families are playing games together and generally having fun! It creates an expectation of Christmas. Also, there is something about that for life: we see a picture of families and what families are like and this is somehow the norm; there are expectations of work and achievements, of health and well-being - and somehow these expectations get inside our head and stay there; we have a picture in our minds of what life should be like. What do we see? As Christians, we have expectations about faith and what that looks like and feels like for the Christian; this is what God will do; this is what faith will be like; this is what church will be.

Disappointments are other side of that coin! When expectations are high, then disappointments can be a big fall, when what we've expected doesn't happen. We love the naivete of children who've never really experienced disappointments, but are just so enthusiastic about life and all that life holds for them. Young people have all their hopes and dreams for themselves and the world and it is great to hear, but you just know that somewhere along the road, there will come a crash with which they'll have to deal. I've given you a slip of paper this morning on which I'm going to ask you to write down your disappointment and then we'll do something with these pieces of paper before the end of the service. Disappointments come when our expectations are not realised; what we'd hoped doesn't happen; what we'd expected is very different from reality. When I was a Sunday school child, there was a magazine called *Morning Rays* and it always had a strip cartoon on the front cover to tell a story with a Bible message; there was a Christmas edition with a story of a little boy opening his present on Christmas day and it was train set, but it was second hand and broken! He was so disappointed! What do you see?

John the Baptist was sounding disappointed in Jesus. John had an expectation of Jesus: "*I baptise...*" (*Matthew 3:11f*) It is a ministry that will destroy all that is wrong in their world, that will judge people, that will expose corruption and judge those who are corrupt. There is a fierceness about this idea, that Jesus who comes after John will judge and destroy all that is wrong in their society. But Jesus did not appear to have the winnowing fork in His hand and the chaff is not being burned up with unquenchable fire. John is experiencing a sense of disappointment. He is now in prison and he hears about Jesus and what Jesus is doing, so he sends two of his friends to Jesus with a question that expresses that sense of unease and possible disappointment: "*Are you...*" (*Matthew 11:2*) John had believed Jesus to be the Messiah; John saw that he was one to prepare the way for the Messiah and that Jesus was that Messiah; but now he's not so sure.

"What do you see?" That's Jesus question to John's friends. "When you come looking at me, what do you see?" "*The blind...*" (*Matthew 11:5*) That's the answer to John's feeling of disappointment: what do you see? They see Jesus doing all these fantastic things to help people in need; they see Jesus doing miracles to heal people; they see the blind receiving sight, the lame walking, the deaf hearing, the dead being raised, the good news preached to poor. When they looked at Jesus, they saw all these fantastic ways in which Jesus was transforming people's lives. They were to take that back to John. This was the answer to his question: yes, Jesus is the One we're been expecting and No, we don't need to look for anyone else!

What John hadn't seen was this other part of the expectation of the Messiah. Yes, Messiah was a king come to judge, but there is a whole strand of promises in the Old Testament of Messiah coming to heal, help, care, and transform lives. We see it in Isaiah 35: "*then will...*"

(Isaiah 35:5) Most of all, we see it in Isaiah 61: “the Spirit...” (Isaiah 61f); we see it in Psalm 146 in much same language: “he upholds...” (Psalm 146:7) God is at work in Jesus; the Spirit of Lord is in Jesus to equip Him to do the work God sent Him to do; this is God’s promise for the Messiah. John had somehow missed some of this Bible pattern for Jesus’ mission as Messiah. “So” John, “what do you see?” We like to think that when John’s friends went back to him in his prison cell and told him what they had seen, that his heart was lifted, that he was full of hope again, that Jesus was bigger than his disappointment from before. Jesus is the One for whom we’ve been waiting and the Spirit of the Lord is at work in world. “Blessed is...” (Matthew 11:6)

John is not alone in his feeling disappointed with Jesus. We might never put it like that, but it’s true, isn’t it! We come to Christian faith with a certain amount of expectation. Some of that is maybe unrealistic: the “come to Jesus and all your troubles will be over” kind of evangelism, or preaching is wrong and creates a wrong expectation of a super-calm and peace-filled life, with no pain and no trouble whatsoever. A few months into that kind of expectation of Jesus and Christian faith and many hopes are dashed! Yet, we’re told that God answers our prayers and that God forgives our sins and that the Spirit helps us to live our life of faith; but we pray and the answer seems not to come immediately; we don’t feel forgiven and we still get things wrong; life is full of conflicts, inside and outside, and something inside us tells us that “you got this wrong; all this God-stuff is just nonsense and now you’ve proved it!”



What do you see? I have put this picture on the screen for the whole sermon today; it is not going to move. What do you see? It is quite a complex image, but what do you see in it? Do you see the person? Do you see the doves? Do you see the fruit? God is at work in us! This is an image that describes something of the ways in which God’s Spirit is at work in us. The person is at the centre of the image and the dove is showing the Spirit is all around us and is at work to influence our choices and shape us as

people. The fruit of the Spirit are growing on us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. God is at work in us by His Spirit; God is about the business of making us new people, people more and more like Jesus; do you see that? Are you making choices in life that are Spirit-inspired to lead you to God; or are you making choices in life that are simply self-centred and selfish? What do you see in yourself?

What do you see of Christmas? Look at our city, what do you see? We see the Street of Light, ferris wheel, Santaland, the German Market and all sorts of other things that go to make up Edinburgh’s Christmas. But is that all you see? I had the privilege two weeks ago to take part in the City’s Nativity Carol Concert. It took place in St Andrew’s Square as we began the season of Advent with setting up the city’s nativity scene. This year it is beside one of the paths through St Andrews Square Gardens, behind the ice rink, a place where thousands of people will walk. Will they see it? I see a city with a set piece depicting the Christian story right at the heart of the city, in one of the city’s central spaces and a city happy to take time to draw our attention to it. We hope and pray that some of these thousands of people will stop as they walk past, will look again at the Nativity scene and be drawn into the story. The Spirit of God is at work in our city. What do you see?

When we look at the church, what do we see? Do we see a group of people keeping the faith alive and passing on that faith to the next generation? Do we see people looking to live out their faith supported by the Spirit? Do we see people trying to nurture that faith by reading the bible and praying? Do we see new people being added week by week? Is that what we see? That's the reality of Church in Juniper Green; is that what you see?

When we look at the world, it is a place of violence and war. We see the city of Aleppo nearly destroyed by war; Mosul, a scene of battle; people across the world victims of corruption and poverty; people in our own city struggling, visiting foodbanks, looking for Christmas presents for their children. Do we also see the Bible Society's shop in Aleppo still open to sell Bibles? Or Christians at work in the refugee camps in Lebanon, to bring relief and hope to millions? Or campaigners looking to bring an end to corruption? Or Christians groups like the Salvation Army, bringing gifts to families, showing the love of Jesus? What do you see?

Look again at Jesus. What do you see? Are there disappointments, with your expectations unrealised? Or do we see someone who loves us endlessly? Do we see promises unfulfilled or someone who has promised to be with us always and everywhere and who generously and graciously has kept that promise? What do we see? John seemed to feel disappointed in Jesus; "is He really the One we've been expecting? He's not doing what I thought He would do!" What do you see? Do we see Jesus make all of these promises come true? Do we see Jesus do the mission of God in the world? Do we see the Spirit of God at work in the world through Jesus? Is that what John now saw? "*Blessed is...*" (Matthew 11:6)