

## Living with Change: Doubt and Assurance

In the past couple of years we have been subject to more changes than most of us have suffered in many years – whether that's Covid-19 or even Brexit; the speed at which things have happened has placed many in difficult circumstances. And the long weeks of Lockdown gave us time to mull over life. And none of it is all over yet. Some of us cope well with change, others find it extremely difficult. Everything was going well then .....

The same could have been said of the first Century's superstar preacher, John the Baptist too. John preached a baptism of repentance, of turning away from the broken religion of the Jews, of personal sin and committing to moral change before God and to wait in expectancy for the coming Messiah.

### EVERYTHING WAS GOING FINE

He was massively successful, he had a significant following. People flocked into the wilderness areas near the Jordan to hear him, commit to the cause of the coming Messiah and then be baptised. These were heady times for John, now at the zenith of his ministry. THEN JESUS TURNED UP Then Jesus, the Messiah he spoke of turned up.

It was exciting for John as he baptised Jesus and God affirmed who He was. It was the start of Jesus' ministry – but it was all change for John. Here are a few verses from John chapter 3 VERSES

*John 3:22 After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptized. 23 Now John also was baptizing at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptized. 24 (This was before John was put in prison.) 25 An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. 26 They came to John and said to him, "Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan—the one you testified about—look, he is baptizing, and everyone is going to him."*

*27 To this John replied, "A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. 28 You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' 29 The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. 30 He must become greater; I must become less." John 3:22-30*

TITLE John recognised that everything was going to change. Actually, that filled him with joy as he saw the Messiah he prophesied doing God's work. He knew that his ministry was almost over and Jesus was effectively displacing him and in doing so, adding so much more! What was John going to do now with his job waning?

### THE CHALLENGE OF RAPID CHANGE

Change is a subject that's topical for us at MRBC as restarted after Lockdown. Some people who were with us two years ago are no longer here. Some died, some have moved to other churches, some have health problems that mean they are no longer able to get to church. For others of us, our circumstances have changed, so we are not able to serve as we once did. As a church can no longer do many of the things we once did not even those we were doing two years ago.

How does that make you feel? Sad? Disappointed? Concerned? Worried? For the disciples of John, things were changing. The new kid on the block was baptising people, making disciples and starting to teach something more than John had. They seem to have been challenged about Jesus by a discussion with a certain un-named Jew about ritual purification. If you remember that was one aspect of John's baptism. Some have speculated that this Jew may have been Nicodemus, who we were introduced to earlier in the chapter. Jesus challenged Nicodemus with these words:

*VERSE*

*5 Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again." 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'* John 3:5-7

For John's disciples, this kind of talk from Jesus was an advance on what John taught. I haven't got time to explore these words fully today, other than in John's preaching, repentance was about changing one's life in preparation for Messiah, but Jesus talked of something deeper relating to the work of the Spirit of God – it wasn't about what they were going to do for God but what God the Spirit was going to do in the lives of those who followed Jesus – and of course Jesus introduced Nicodemus and others to the whole idea of being born again.

Things were changing as Jesus increased and John decreased. Something good was being replaced by something better. This brings me to the first point I would like to share with you today.

### **The Inevitability of Change**

I don't know how much you like or dislike change. My mother used to tell me that as a child I didn't like change. That was some time ago and usually I am comfortable with the idea of change but I think the nature and speed of the changes brought by Covid has caught many Christians and Churches on the hop. We didn't see that one coming.

So here we are. What do we do about it as a church? Do we lament that we can't do what a neighbouring church does? Do we muddle along as best we can with what we've got? Or do we look at the word of God? When faced with the decline of his ministry, John rejoiced in where his ministry had got to:

He said: '*I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him.' 29 The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.*' He was overjoyed that he had been replaced by the Messiah: the Anointed One of God. John's chapter had closed and an exciting chapter was now unfolding.

Do we look at the present situation as a glass half empty or a glass half full situation. When Covid came, a chapter in the history of this church closed. Was that because God was no longer pleased with us? If that was the case, He wasn't pleased with most churches in Felixstowe and in a lot of other places too. Or is God telling us to clear the decks and make room for the heavenly bridegroom?

At times like this I would say that we should be looking out for what God is doing, we should be seeking Jesus who calls out to us “Follow me” and we should trust in the power of the Spirit within us. God has cleared the space for us to seek Him and I believe He is calling us to use our time wisely to seek Him.

What I'd also say is that the decline of John wasn't because he'd failed, but because he had succeeded and finished what God had called him to do. We read earlier in Matthew 11 how Jesus speaks of how John was the greatest of the prophets. He had done a good job. He had served faithfully. In the past this church has been a faithful witness to the Gospel. We have seen people come to faith and grow as disciples. But times change, as they do; and Jesus says “follow me.”

Where was Jesus, the Messiah going in John's day?

### **The challenge of the new**

Jesus was doing a completely new thing which turns those that come into God's kingdom through Him, to be far greater than even John ever was. Matt 11:11 *Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.*

TITLE Why? Because in Christ, God makes all those who trust and follow Jesus to be the children of God. Even the least is greater than John, not because they are cool and superior but that God is their Father and His grace has made them that way. You have been saved by grace through faith — and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast. Eph 2:8-9.

Jesus was introducing something new – the Good News that God was bringing his grace, His unmerited favour on those who would believe. It was a challenge, A new challenge. We know how it ended.

Our challenge is to follow Jesus. To see the opportunities, however unlikely or incredible they may seem and follow Him. I would suggest that doing the same old thing is not an option. We don't have the people and resources any more. Jesus is moving on – we must follow because it is only on that route we will find the resources, and the means to give Him glory.

Let me tell you a little story. About three decades ago, there was a small Gospel Hall in a Suffolk village that was down to its last handful of mostly elderly people. They were losing their vision and their hope until a young man who was part of the church suggested they may like to think of abandoning the Hall and holding services in the leisure centre in a large local village. The church hummed and harred about it but gave him the opportunity to give it a try because at that point there was little left to lose. It was well off their comfort zone. The leisure centre was well known and well used by the community and they proceeded to do family oriented services. The church blossomed so much so, that they expanded to an even larger village where they ended up in the sports hall of a school. It thrives to this day. That's a true story as that's a potted history of The Forge Church in Debenham.

How did that happen? Because the church was ready to see where Jesus was; and follow Him, trusting Him for everything they needed to be a vibrant church. Our forthcoming history will be along different lines, but the church will thrive if we are prepared to look for where Jesus is and follow Him – taking steps of faith as we do. It just needs vision and imagination.

Oh, and as we see where Jesus calls us and seek to follow, ignore the naysayers. Jesus said this: ‘*To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market-places and calling out to others: 17 “We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.”*

*18 For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon.” 19 The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.” But wisdom is proved right by her deeds.*

Our society is rather the same as the one in Jesus’ time. There are those with the small child mentality “*we called out to you to do our stuff and be like us and you didn’t play the game.*” Do we find our future trying to come to a rapport with the values of society. No , we follow Jesus we cling to His word, we are obedient to Him. It’s an important point because even if we are super successful, many in our society will still find fault. So John they called a demon for not drinking wine and eating large insects, and Jesus was just a beer-swilling, pizza-guzzling friend of low-lives. Forget trying to be cool – just do God’s will because we are going to sniped at either way.

### **The assurance of the power of God**

Wind on a matter of months and it was the end of John’s career. He was in jail, now own, possibly doubting. They were no longer heady day days and he wanted to check that his faith in Jesus wasn’t misplaced, so he sent this question to Jesus ‘*Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?*’ Being locked away means your mental processes don’t work as well as they should. Funny that. We’ve been sort of jailed twice in 18 months and have had severe restrictions on our freedoms. It can be depressing and I’d be surprised if any of us didn’t struggle in some way.

There are times in our lives when we seem trapped, limited, out of ideas, in a spiritual low and we feel clueless. And it doesn’t help when someone like me comes along and says “let’s look and see what Jesus is doing!” As we heard earlier, some have reflected on their lives and sought to look elsewhere for a spiritual home. If that is where God is leading them, we can only wish them well and trust the Lord will bless them. Maybe we still feel that this is our spiritual home but feel down. Let’s ask that Jesus will open our minds to who He is – He’s not finished with us yet.

When John’s disciples asked Jesus the question, the reply was “*Go back and report to John what you hear and see: the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.*’ Our faith is one of power, so in our doubts and weaknesses let’s ask Jesus to open our minds to who He is, what He’s done, what He’s doing and what He wants to do through us. “ And then let’s follow Him.

Let’s pray.

Father, we come before You this morning recognising we need to change.

If we have never trusted Jesus, we need to change: to confess our sins before you and follow Jesus, accepting Your free gift of eternal life, of membership of Your family, of Your Holy Spirit in our lives, to walk with You day be day and to have a future hope.

For those of us who know You and You have called to be part of this church, we confess that these have been difficult times for us. By the power of Your Spirit, lift our spirits, lift our minds and envision us for what you want us to do in the next phase of the life of this church. Help us to have Your imagination and creativity. Fill us afresh with Your Holy Spirit. May we worship may we serve, may we bring glory to Jesus' name.

Amen.

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

*Read Matthew 11:11-19 and John 3:22-30*

1. How do you cope with change? How did you cope with the rapid changes that resulted from Covid and lockdowns? How are you responding at present to the changes in church?
2. How did John the Baptist respond to the loss of his ministry? What do you think we can learn from his response and Jesus' attitude to him?
3. What were the priorities for believers in the messages of John and of Jesus? How may those help us determine how we go forward as a church? Consider these possible for "going forward – or a combination of them:"
  - A return to old ways we did some time ago when the church was thriving
  - Following trends within the community and society to try to engage with them
  - Seeking God's will and way even if the result doesn't seem fashionable.
4. How may the first few verses of Matthew 11 help in understanding the key to what will truly make a difference as we seek to share Good News? How do you think we should proceed with that?