



Luke 7:21–23

21 At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, illnesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. 22 So he replied to the messengers, ‘Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: 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. 23 Blessed is anyone who does not

stumble on account of me.'

Reflection

One of my favourite chapters in Scripture is Hebrews 11. In it the author of Hebrews lists some of the greatest men and women in the Bible – heroes of our faith – to motivate us to place a similar confidence in God. But on a closer reading of the lives of these heroes of faith almost all of them have another thing in common apart from their vaunting faith, and that thing is their failure. Noah got drunk on too much wine, Abraham twice pretended his wife was his sister placing her in great danger, Moses murdered a man and refused God like a coward needing Aaron as his crux, Jacob did some really reprehensible things in his youth, Joseph was oh so proud of his

special treatment ahead of his elder brothers, David was an adulterer and murderer, Samuel turned a blind eye when it came to the sin of his sons, Rahab was a brothel madame, and Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament books and letters, was a murderer of Christians – and this is to name just a few. You see, no matter how big the name, to a person, when it comes to humankind Scripture has one overriding theme, and that is that we are all sinners saved by grace. And in yesterday's passage we saw even the greatest amongst us fall. Jesus said that this man was the greatest prophet ever to walk the earth; that no one born of woman was greater than he, and yet in yesterday's passage we saw even the great John the Baptist's faith falter. We read,

18 John's disciples told him about all these things. Calling two of them, 19 he sent them to the Lord to ask, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?' 20 When the men came to Jesus, they said, 'John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"'

John had been set aside from birth for the service of our Lord. His birth was announced by the angel Gabriel in the Holy of Holies. No alcohol had ever passed his lips. He'd lived a lifestyle of austerity and the contemplation of God in the wilderness, modelled on that of the prophet Elijah. He ate locusts and honey and wore a garment made out of camel hair (which was

about as comfortable as it sounds), shunning creature comforts in place of preparing himself and others for the coming of the kingdom of God. And at the height of his powers, with thousands coming out to hear him preach, repent of their sins and turn back to God John had humbly handed the mantle over to Jesus having had the inestimable privilege of watching heaven been torn open, the Holy Spirit descend like a dove to anoint the Son of God, and hearing at the same moment the Father thunder from heaven his blessing upon his beloved Son. That's John.

Any yet John sends his communique to Jesus not from a vast gathering of the faithful in the wilderness but from the isolation of a dark, dank prison cell from which he will never leave. He's been arrested

by Herod Antipas, or more accurately, by the scorn of Herod's wife Herodias who shortly will corner her husband into having John beheaded. Perhaps the writing is on the wall for John, but whatever it is, even he momentarily doubts Jesus and so sends some of his followers to ask,

“Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

Jesus replies in today's passage from Luke 7:21–23,

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seen and heard: 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. 23 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

Was it John's circumstances that played a part in his doubt? I'm sure they did. I can only imagine what it is like being an innocent man waiting on death-row. But perhaps even more so I think it was that Jesus wasn't playing to the script. You see, first century expectations about the Messiah were drawn almost exclusively from the Old Testament passages that spoke most loudly to Israel's current situation of oppression under the Romans. And so it is very likely that John was looking to Je-

Jesus to come as an all-conquering king, as we read in places like Psalm 2, 2 Samuel 7 and Daniel 7, one who would reclaim David's throne in Jerusalem and rule on it forever. But there is no conquering army, no rebel forces ready to emancipate John from prison. The revolution that Jesus is starting will be something far greater than John could have ever dreamed of and the battle that Jesus is fighting is far deeper, darker and more urgent. Jesus hasn't come to do battle with the Romans or Caesar Augustus, he's come to do battle with Satan and his demons, he's come to defeat Satan, sin and death and rid the world of sin's curse forever. And it is to this spiritual warfare that Jesus alludes in his reply,

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many who had diseases, illnesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. 22 So he replied to the messengers, 'Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: 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.

The prince of peace isn't raising an army of zealots to overthrow Jerusalem but he is waging war against the ancient Enemy and beginning to cleanse the world of sin. Jesus invites John's disciples to look at the proof all around them, the empirical evidence, the supernatural evidence of demons being cast out, the blind regaining sight, the lame taking their first hesi-

tant steps, lepers rejoicing and re-joining families and communities who had written them off as the walking dead, deaf people hearing the voice of their children again, and the poor receiving the gospel in droves. Even the dead are being raised! Jesus is defeating Satan and driving back sin's effects in our world. But also Jesus' words ring with Scriptural evidence that he is the Messiah, quoting to John snippets from Isaiah 26:19, 29:18ff; 35:5ff, and 61:1. 'The miracles I am doing John, the healing that I am bringing to our world, is exactly what Isaiah prophesied about the Messiah, about me; but don't you worry, the best is yet to come.'

Jesus then pronounces a blessing. He sends a word of encouragement to John to strengthen him in his faith.

23 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

In other words Jesus says to John through his disciples, 'John, you and anyone else like you will be blessed if you do not fall away because of your disappointment with the way I choose to work.' And we have the strong impression from Scripture that John took heart from Jesus' words and remained steadfast to the end.

Think & Pray

Even the great John the Baptist experienced moments of doubt in his faith, brought on by extreme circumstances, and more deeply, by the realisation that life was not playing out according to his

plans or expectations. Are you ready for when this happens to you? Are you ready to trust Jesus, no matter what, when his plans for your life diverge from your plans for your life? Because it's times like these when our faith will be tested the most. But in the end, one of the greatest things about our faith in Jesus Christ is that whether it is weak or strong the test of faith is not how big it is but who it is in. And if our faith is in Jesus then he will never, ever let us down, no matter the storms we face in life. Think deeply over Jesus' words this morning,

23 Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

And pray to God that you and I both would learn to trust God's plans for our life, no matter the season.