

## Scripture Reading for Sunday June 28 2020

### **Matt 10:16-20, 40 NIV**

<sup>16</sup>“I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. <sup>17</sup>Be on your guard; you will be handed over to the local councils and be flogged in the synagogues. <sup>18</sup>On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. <sup>19</sup>But when they arrest you, do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, <sup>20</sup>for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.

<sup>40</sup>“Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me.

### **Matthew 11:1-15 (NIV)**

<sup>11</sup> After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

<sup>2</sup> When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples <sup>3</sup> to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?”

<sup>4</sup> Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”

<sup>7</sup> As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? <sup>8</sup> If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. <sup>9</sup> Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.”<sup>11</sup> 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. <sup>12</sup> From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it. <sup>13</sup> For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. <sup>14</sup> And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. <sup>15</sup> Whoever has ears, let them hear.

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<sup>1</sup> Mal. 3:1.

## Sermon: It's OK to Doubt; It's Better to Hope

Jesus said, "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves."<sup>2</sup> Clearly John the Baptist hadn't read this memo as he was more like "a bull in a China shop" and, consequently, he was arrested for his blunt, political *incorrectness*! Jesus was, in fact, warning his disciples that the kingdom of God is on a collision course with the kingdoms and values of this world. We, along with Matthew's *readers*, can appreciate that fact because of the events of Easter week; darkness tried to extinguish the Light. Consequently, this warning also for us today, because: Ethics matter; truth matters; integrity matters; dignity matters; "Black lives matter," migrant workers matter, and how we use what authority we have also matters. Nevertheless, in all we do, Jesus encourages us to be as wise as owls and live lives that are above reproach.<sup>3</sup>

Matthew, after relaying that speech of warning and commission, transitions back to the ministry of Jesus<sup>4</sup> and the story picks up with John the Baptist languishing in Herod's prison for speaking truth-to-power over Herod's ethical misconduct.<sup>5</sup> Evidently John was disappointed, that's because he was a prophet of the old-school and he had expected the Messiah, "the One who is to come," to bring judgement and fire!<sup>6</sup> He had heard about the *kinds* of things Jesus was doing, like the compassionate miracles recorded in Matthew 8-9, and this *wasn't* what he had expected. Perhaps he also wondered why Jesus didn't confront wicked Herod, claim the throne, become king himself, and then release him from prison. So John began to *doubt* and he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the One who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"<sup>7</sup> This may seem a bit surprising to us, after all, according to Matthew, John had recognized Jesus to be the Messiah when he came to John to be baptized, and he heard the voice from heaven proclaiming: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."<sup>8</sup> Yet despite what John had witnessed, he now apparently has doubts. We too may have *our* doubts and we might articulate John's question in this way: "Is Jesus really the definitive revelation of God, or should we look elsewhere for answers to the ultimate questions of life?"

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<sup>2</sup> Matt 10:16. The tone of the text changes dramatically from 10:5-15. Scholars reckon – with good reason - that Matthew has merged later instructions that Jesus gives to his followers just prior to his death to create one overall speech on the same kind of theme. This is referred to as the "Missionary Discourse." (See also Mark 6:8-11 and 13:3-13.) Those words are, then, not just for the immediate disciples of Jesus, but Matthew presents them as pertinent advice for his *readers*, 50 years later. At *that* time, Jerusalem and its Temple had been destroyed and the relationship between the early Church and *some* Jewish leaders were tense, as well as with the Roman authorities. (Also see Matt 10:16-42 in light of the Book of Acts.)

<sup>3</sup> The same message occurs in 1 Peter; see: <https://securservercdn.net/198.71.233.204/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/As-Slaves-of-God-Live-as-Free-People.pdf> .

<sup>4</sup> The wording of Matt 11:1 is repeated in 7:28; 13:53, 19:1, 26:1. These distinct 5 sections may well be an allusion to the 5 books of Moses. For Matthew, Moses prefigures Jesus by *giving* the Law (Torah), but Jesus is greater than Moses and, as God's authorized One, he *reinterprets* the Law for the day in the Sermon on the Mount; Matt 5-7.

<sup>5</sup> See also Matt 4:12; 14:3–12.

<sup>6</sup> See Matt 3:7-12.

<sup>7</sup> Matt 11:3. This phrase "The One who is to come" echoes Matt 21:9; 23:39; Mark 11:9; John 6:35 (and Ps 118:26.)"

<sup>8</sup> Matt 3:13-17.

At this point, I simply want to say: “*It’s OK to doubt.*” When things don’t work out as we had hoped, it’s OK to ask tough questions of God. You will notice that Jesus *doesn’t* reprimand John. Those of you who have been raised that “to doubt is to sin” must take comfort from this story and pay attention to what happens next.

Jesus replies, “Go back and report to John what you *hear* and *see.*”<sup>9</sup> That *order* is important because in Matthew 5-7 we *hear* the “Sermon on the Mount” and then in Matthew 8-9 we *see* the miracles and exorcisms.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Matthew also used this incident to address the doubts and questions of his *readers*, and so we can tag along with them with our own misgivings. Jesus continues: “Tell John, 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.”<sup>11</sup> By using those words, Jesus wants John to have an “*aha*” moment - and Matthew wants *his readers* to do the same. John, being the prophet and priest that he was, would know his scriptures and recognise those words were directly from Isaiah, who said: “Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert.”<sup>12</sup> And again: “The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted.”<sup>13</sup> Jesus was telling John to *make the connection* between those oracles and the deeds of Jesus that John has heard about. And Matthew also wants his readers to get it clear that even though they are experiencing hardships, Jesus really is “the One who is to come”; he really is the Messiah, but they also need to recognise that Jesus is *redefining* the Jewish expectation of Messiahship – including John’s – from one of judgement to mercy, compassion, and healing.

I have some observations to make. First, John the Baptist would have noticed what Jesus *omitted* in the last part of Isaiah 61 verse 1, namely “he has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and release the prisoners.”<sup>14</sup> This is a *very* hard aspect in the answer Jesus gives to John. Both John and Jesus had the *same* message, namely: “The kingdom of God has come *near.*”<sup>15</sup> But, despite the spectacular miracles of Jesus, God’s kingdom has *yet* to come in all its fulness; it is both “now-and-not-yet.” We also live with the same frustrations today. In this context, Jesus is saying to John, “Yes, I really *am* the Messiah, however, *don’t* expect that I will be rescuing you from prison.” You see, for Jesus to openly declare his

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<sup>9</sup> Matt 11:4.

<sup>10</sup> See also Matt 4:23; 9:35 where the order is maintained; cf. the ordering of Jesus’ activities in Mark’s gospel.

<sup>11</sup> Matt 11:5. See also Luke 4:18-19; 7:18–23.

<sup>12</sup> Isa 35:5-6. See also Ps 146:5-9.

<sup>13</sup> Isa 61:1. Matthew also seems to be drawing on a tradition that finds a very close parallel with the 4Q521 text discovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls: “. . . heaven and earth will obey his Messiah. . . For the Lord will see the pious, and call the righteous by name, and his spirit will hover over the poor and he will renew the faithful by his might. For he will glorify the pious on the throne of an eternal kingdom, releasing captives, giving sight to the blind and raising of those who are bowed down. . . for he will heal the wounded, give life to the dead and preach good news to the poor and he will satisfy the weak ones and lead those who have been cast out and enrich the hungry.” (Richard B Hays, *Echoes of the Scriptures in the Gospels* (Baylor, 2016), 149.) We do not know whether Matthew was aware of such a tradition, but his text certainly resonates with it.

<sup>14</sup> This is most evident in Luke 4:18-19; 7:18–23, since he quotes from Isaiah in *both* places.

<sup>15</sup> Matt 3:2, 4:17, (or “kingdom of heaven” in Matthew’s terminology, out of respect for the holy name of “God.”)

own Messiahship *at that time* would have been *both* dangerous - in that Jesus would also have been arrested by Herod and likely killed, *and* counterproductive to Christ's overall mission. God has his own timetable. John may have been disappointed, even disillusioned, by Jesus' reply and lack of action; nevertheless, Jesus offers him a gentle word of encouragement – "Blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."<sup>16</sup> Matthew's *readers* may have their doubts over the scandalous credibility of a crucified Messiah who was then resurrected from the dead; to them - and to us - the blessing of Jesus still applies: "Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."<sup>17</sup>

Second, John was obviously a devout person and knew the Scriptures, yet he had missed something of critical importance in his reading of the texts. In the same way, it's all too easy for us to have blinkered vision and see what we only want to see when we read the Bible. In John's case, he – like other Jews of the day – expected the Messiah to be a *mighty*, political deliverer of God's people.<sup>18</sup> In a similar way, when something happens that doesn't align with *our* expectations of God, we too begin to doubt. Perhaps it's a life-changing experience and we are wondering where God "fits in" to our bewildering situation. Perhaps it's a prayer that's not answered in the way we would like, or on the timescale we want. Whatever it is, we all have an understanding of the nature of God and we also have expectations as to how God works in the world. And when reality doesn't fit into *our* assumptions we can, just like John the Baptist, have a crisis of faith. During the initial phases of such a crisis, all a person can do is keep on going, hang on by a thread of faith. I want to reassure you that thread is strong and capable of taking the strain. Nevertheless, later on, when some a "new normal" occurs, it is wise to ask questions. Questions like: Did I misunderstand the character of God? And for those who think God is *punishing* them for something they did, I would say, yes, you *have* misunderstood the heart of God revealed in Jesus! And when we, like John, expect God to work in the world with strong-arm tactics or with a magic wand, we misunderstand God's methods. The kingdom of God does not come in the power and splendor of human achievement – what Martin Luther called the *Theology of Glory* – but by the way of the *Theology of the Cross*, with humility, poverty, suffering, and a lack of worldly power.<sup>19</sup> And we may doubt that this approach will achieve what God has in mind. Remember, Jesus did *not* promise his followers would be exempt from suffering as a "reward" for their faith; no, all he said was, "I will be with you until the end of the age."<sup>20</sup> The question is, "Can we live in the hope of that promise?"

Finally, because of all that going on the world today, some of you may be having doubts about God. Does God *really* care for us? Do my prayers make *any* difference? Why doesn't God *do* more?<sup>21</sup> Without

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<sup>16</sup> Matt 11:6, NRSV, NET.

<sup>17</sup> Matt 11:6, NIV. See also 1 Cor 1:23.

<sup>18</sup> I think this confusion is also behind the words of Nicodemus to Jesus, who said: "We know that you are a teacher who has *come from God*. For no one could perform the miracles you're doing if God were not with him," John 3:3. (For "miracles" read "signs," typical Johannine language, but it means the same thing here.) Circumstances have a way of thrusting themselves into our theological paradigms and challenging our basic assumptions.

<sup>19</sup> Or Christendom's triumphal *theologia gloriae* contrasting with Christ's *theologia crucis*, i.e., the way modeled by Jesus.

<sup>20</sup> Matt 28:20.

<sup>21</sup> See Reddish, *Does God Always Get What God Wants? An Exploration of God's Activity in a Suffering World* (Cascade, 2018).

sounding callous, there is nothing original in those questions; John the Baptist asked them all! One of Matthew's concerns is that people do not "fall away" as a result of a crisis of faith.<sup>22</sup> Again, it's OK to doubt; *it's better to hope*. When we doubt, I suggest we *pause*, and look back at what we believe God *has* done in our lives, in the lives of those we know, and what we confidently believe God has done in history. That's what Jesus tells John to do with his disappointment; to recognise the *evidence* that God *has been* at work *and* then remain open to new surprises. Just as Jesus didn't rebuke John for his inadequate understanding but nudged him in the right direction, so the Spirit of God will nudge us onward, if we are open to that possibility. Jesus doesn't force himself on people; that's as true today as ever it was. The darkness of doubt may try to extinguish the light of hope, but the resurrection reveals that the darkness will *not* overcome the Light. Hold tight to that fact as, with the Spirit's help, we work with perseverance to turn doubt into hope. Amen.

#### **Added Note:**

At the end of this discussion with John's disciples, Jesus then helped crowd understand *who* John is and through that, reveal to the discerning *who* he is. Jesus reminds the crowd that they *didn't* go into the wilderness to hear someone who would simply say what they wanted to hear. John was clearly *not* someone who would change his message according to the prevailing opinion or political correctness. Nor, Jesus observes, did they go to the wilderness to see someone dressed in fine robes appropriate for someone who lived in a palace.<sup>23</sup> Rather they went to see a *prophet*, and prophets are not known for their softness or for being well-dressed. John stands in the traditional line of loud-spoken prophets and its no surprise that he ended up in prison. Even so, Jesus claims that John wasn't just any prophet; he was someone who the prophets of old spoke about; he was the "Elijah" who was to come.<sup>24</sup> That being the case, Jesus is obliquely revealing his own identity as the one who comes *after* that "Elijah" person, namely the Messiah himself.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See: Matt 13:21; 24:10; 26: 31-33; 69-75.

<sup>23</sup> John was unlike any courtier they knew; he was nothing like Herod – whose emblem, on his coins, was a Galilean reed waving in the wind.

<sup>24</sup> Mal 3:1; 4:5; Matt 11:14. See also Matt 17:10–13.

<sup>25</sup> Hence Matt 11:15 – "Whoever has ears, let them hear."