

Response to Jesus

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[0:00] I've been keeping up with the news this week. Sort of. Even the Prime Minister called it a nightmare Alice in Wonderland.

There's what's called a caucus race where everybody runs round in a circle. At the end, everybody wins, but that's just the same as saying nobody wins, isn't it?

Everybody gets a meaningless prize. Well, perhaps your literary tastes may be run more to Jonathan Swift and Gulliver's Travels.

Do you remember there that vicious wars that were fought between the Little Endians and the Big Endians? And in case you don't know the story and don't know what that means, what they were fighting over was which is the best end to open an egg?

Those who wanted to open it at the Little End and those who wanted to open it at the Big End. And these nations have been at war for a long time just over this question.

[1:25] Well, perhaps you're familiar with the writings maybe of George Orwell who had a rather darker vision perhaps, a less humorous vision at least. Big Brother aided by some rather fancy information technology in 1984.

This is the book 1984 which I have read, by the way. Somebody was saying on the radio this afternoon that's one of the bad books that people claim to have read when they really haven't. But I did read it many, many years ago I have to say. Yeah, but with some rather fancy information technology the government in 1984 not only controls what people are allowed to say but even what people are allowed to think.

Now, that may have been seen thought as a rather absurd thing at the time mightn't it but are we not now coming close to that?

You can have attitudes as long as they're the right attitudes the politically correct attitudes but way retired you if you disagree with them. And of course George Orwell's other famous book is Animal Farm where the farm yard animals rebel against the farmer and set up their own state.

[2:49] But it all goes horribly wrong if you read the book and the slogan goes well it starts with four legs good, two legs bad very key on the slogans but eventually it lands up as all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others and aren't we very much now in that nightmare all the electorate is equal but some of them are more equal than others at least some claim they have more right to be heard than others.

Well I think we'll stick with Lewis Carroll as a fellow mathematician and a mathematician by training as you know and Lewis Carroll Charles Dodgson of course was a mathematician so we'll stick with Lewis Carroll in the words of Lewis Carroll it's perfectly possible to believe six impossible things before breakfast.

That's actually from Alice in Wonderland if you're wondering but actually I'm going to try and describe this nightmare that we've fallen into not as Alice in Wonderland but as that of Alice through the looking glass.

The looking glass world looks very much like the everyday world only it's back to front and nothing is quite what it seems.

And that's what you get when you start seeing the meaning of life in terms of carpentry and building services which is what these people in our passage this evening were doing.

[4:28] They understood carpentry they understood what Joseph did they understood what Jesus had been doing a few years back but wisdom and

these signs they couldn't get their head around that at all.

The first sight it looks very much like the ordinary world but as I said it's back to front and the more you get into it the weirder it seems to be.

I'm not going to give details of the book Alice in Wonderland it's worth reading if you ever get the chance but I will mention one or two things later on of the features sorry I mean Alice through the looking glass.

So I'd like to look at our passage this evening in terms of well the two parts of it obviously divides fairly obviously into two parts.

first of all they're the Nazarene's reaction to when Jesus came to talk to them to come back to them came home and then that last verse which I'd like to describe to you it's a bit fanciful but bear with me if you will I'd like to describe to you as the the marvellous world of looking glass but why do I call it marvellous?

[5:52] well actually because this is more or less how Jesus described or at least how Mark tells us that Jesus saw it in Mark 6 5 and 6 which is the version in Mark of this same story Mark writes the following Jesus that could there do no mighty work except that he laid his hands upon a few sick people and healed them and he marvelled because of their unbelief that's the King James version but I've read from that because it seems to actually be the best translation Jesus found their unbelief something marvellous Jesus could heal the sick Jesus spent time in the desert debating with the with the devil he could heal the sick he could feed the crowd feeding 5,000 people with 5 loaves and 2 fishes didn't faze him at all he could go toe to toe with the intellectual elite in debate as we read in the previous chapter he could do all these things as it says without being phased and there are marvels aplenty in these passages aren't there things that we would perhaps find marvellous but what is it that Jesus himself finds marvellous well according to Mark the thing he found marvellous the thing that was almost impossible to get your head round almost impossible to understand and to see was that his fellow townsfolk who have known him all his life and with all that they've seen and all that they've heard and all that they've been told and all their history as godly

Jews they still do not believe isn't that a truly marvellous thing of course we don't find it marvellous do we because we find unbelief quite easy but Jesus said this is a marvellous thing it's almost impossible to credit and it says tells us this passage tells us remarkably it even affected his behaviour to some extent it says he was unable to do mighty works there except for a few healings I'm not going to go into the theological issues of exactly how that worked I think that would not be a particularly useful thing to do but certainly it changed the way that Jesus himself reacted to the crowd and the place he was in so let's look at this in a bit more detail we all know the proverb don't we familiarity breeds contempt similar sayings apparently were current in the world in the time of Jesus fairly obvious thing to say in one sense and yet actually when you think about it it expresses something rather deeper and darker than at first appears Matthew has just recounted Jesus teaching on the separation at the end of the age stories of the wheat and tares and so on but now he describes a more immediate separation because it seems the kingdom of heaven is near that's what Jesus has been preaching the kingdom of heaven is near and yet its natural citizens are all booking their tickets out why was this and if even those people could not believe perhaps it's understandable in one sense that people can't believe today but we have the testimony and we have the words of Jesus and so Jesus says blessed are those who believe who have not seen so why is it that people don't believe today well there's a sort of ambiguity in the human spirit we desire the new and yet we also fear change and the unknown that's perhaps why the

Brexit debate is so visceral it's only a political question in one sense but some people are really fed up with the status quo but others fear what change might bring in fact truth told both of us do both those things most of the time we are discontent with the status quo but which way to the promised land we want a leader don't we we want someone who can show us the way who can take us in fact we want a Moses and yet we won't follow them just as the people had difficulty following Moses at the time we expect our politicians to lead don't we but then when they do we accuse them of being

elitist and out of touch with the people and so what do we find well we find that in their elitist way our politicians behave in exactly the same petty manner as the rest of us they don't describe any of the wisdom we might want from our political elite these

Nazarenes that we're reading about here had the same! John the Baptist preached that the kingdom is near but John is dead so how do we get to the kingdom then how will who will show us the way and you'll find for a job like that there's no shortage of applicants and there certainly were at the time there were any number of leaders religious leaders political leaders at the time of Jesus all with their own agenda and all promising to lead the people into the promised land but are any of them qualified we want wisdom from our political elite we want wisdom from our religious elite as well don't we and yet later Jesus would accuse them all of being blind guides and part of the problem

[12:47] I think seems to be a sense of unreality that's the problem that these Nazarenes had really after his preaching tour of the Galilee region Jesus had come home to Nazareth his hometown but what kind of reception did he get well Nazareth is kind of down to earth northern town perhaps it has a certain mutual antipathy to those big city folk in Jerusalem they're of down to earth sort of people and carpentry is something they understand that's something solid and real but that's the trouble with that is they can't see beyond it a few years ago Jesus fixed my front door and he made a very good job of it but now who is this guy they might be saying say who are you and what have you done with the real

Jesus might be what they're thinking perhaps who is this man who we thought we knew well the carpenter's son but it seems that we didn't know him at all and on the other hand of course if they did decide they wanted some religious stuff they knew where to look and you certainly don't look in Nazareth that's just not where it's happening that's not where the religious leaders are gathering and discussing that happens in Jerusalem Jerusalem is where the teachers are and after all that is where John the Baptist came from John at least had the right pedigree he came from Jerusalem and his father was a priest but Jesus Jesus is the son of a carpenter and he's come from Nazareth we know Nazareth we live there and there's a sense of unreality grips them they just can't get their head around it to the Pharisees as we were reading say a few chapters or so earlier to the Pharisees Jesus was an uneducated northerner probably in league with the devil as well the friends and neighbours here have the opposite issue Jesus is too much a man of the people John was the son of a priest but he dabbled in politics and got his head cut off even Moses had some political training but these neighbours ancestors had found it difficult even to follow Moses but of course it's an excuse really because when you preach the gospel whatever you do is wrong later the apostle Paul would come along and he had all the right pedigree he had all the right degrees and qualifications he had studied with all the best teachers did they treat him any better no they tried to do away with him they were just as offended at him as they were at Jesus some people are just never satisfied and Jesus himself commented on this perverseness of unbelief didn't he so this is Matthew 11 Jesus says we played the flute for you and you did not dance so we sang a dirge and you did not mourn John came neither eating nor drinking and they say he has a demon the son of man came eating and drinking and they say here's a glutton and a drunkard a friend of tax collectors and sinners and then the sting in the tail but wisdom is proved right by our actions note these last few words in the bible wisdom is usually feminine interestingly enough

I won't go into what that in detail but certainly in Proverbs wisdom is given a feminine persona and Jesus seems to say the same thing here and yet it is Christ who is our wisdom so Job had asked the right question all those years before hadn't he where can wisdom be found where does understanding dwell we won't listen to all these highfalutin teachers from Jerusalem so one of our own comes to us and we won't listen to him either the gospel can be proclaimed in different ways can't it it can be sophisticated and philosophical as Paul did when he was in Athens teaching to all those academics or it can be down to earth and practical as when

[18:25] Jesus spoke to the woman at the well and dealt with the issues that she had immediately before her Paul said indeed that the gospel preacher should be all things to all men in order to save some that's 1 Corinthians 9 22 whatever style you adapt though whatever style you adopt sorry you can be pretty sure that the world will make it an excuse to

reject your message but those Nazarenes actually got half the way didn't they they actually were asking the right question they did ask the question where did this wisdom come from where is that it's first

I just can't find the verse 17 no it's not 57 it's 50 too small for my 54 where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers they asked they did start by asking the right question but perhaps lacking the torments that Job had been through and too much immersed in the everyday of life they just couldn't arrive at the right answer life for those friends and neighbours wasn't perfect but it wasn't all that bad either was it they did need somebody competent to fix their front door and they found somebody who could fix their front door for them but when they found it they shut it in the face of any ideas coming in so where did Jesus power and wisdom come from that was certainly the right question like the

Pharisees earlier the people couldn't deny that something extraordinary was happening this was the buzz of the whole district but the Pharisees you remember attributed Jesus power to Beelzebub the devil the people of Nazareth found a different way to avoid the implications of Jesus call to repent and believe theirs was a down to earth we might say a grounded community carpentry they understood common sense they understood wisdom was something other people did and Jesus just didn't seem to have the right qualifications and anyway what about his claim to be a prophet well a prophet by definition is somebody sent by God isn't he so therefore obviously he has to come from somewhere else otherwise he can't be sent that's probably what they were thinking that's what Jesus said isn't it prophet is not without honor except in his own country and so what do we read Matthew records that Jesus' neighbors took offense at him the Greek word is scandalizo from which we obviously get our word scandal but the literal meaning is that they tripped up his background was an impediment an obstacle which caused them to fall over they just couldn't get their head around it but what was it that tripped them up they didn't have anything against carpenters in fact it was the prophet thing that was offensive to them it was the message that they rejected and other people use much the same arguments today older generations learned about Christianity at school but then they didn't learn it from people who really believed it and so it didn't make much sense to them in fact I always think say to people who lament the removal of religious sort of Christian religious instructions from schools is that what we used to get

I mean I grew up in this what you used to get was just enough religion to inoculate you against the real thing probably better off without it at all than have it taught by people who don't really believe it younger people of course have just been told unreservedly that God is a made up idea and the Bible is just fairy tales and that no reasonable person has believed this stuff since the 18th century quite wrong of course but that's what people claim so there is one sense in which the modern 21st century western is different and yet not different from those Nazarene villages their unbelief and the unbelief today is grounded in the everyday experience of life and that comfortable world view of the Nazarene villages it's grounded in the everyday experience of life and the views of your

[23:47] Facebook friends where you just have a circle of people who think the same as you do not only is it refused to think outside of the box it's confident that the box is all there is it claims to be realistic yet what do we find it becomes increasingly unhinged from reality and you'll find people will believe all sorts of bizarre things fake news is everywhere isn't it people believe the most bizarre claims without even stopping to think does this even make sense let alone is it true and instead of reality you get rhetoric instead of a sensible debate over Brexit or anything else you get slogans and petitions and demonstrations and mudslinging and well people just saying what I say is right without in any sense testing the ideas that they have or actually seriously debating on them and trying to make any progress of understanding this is not realism it's the looking glass world and you get prejudice and bigotry become terms of abuse rather than terms of argument anybody all sorts of people get called bigots nowadays but not with any consideration of what the word actually means anybody who disagreed with you is accused of prejudice aren't they you're accused of something phobia which means an irrational fear what does that mean then it says that the thing you're disagreeing about you can't possibly have any rational objection to it

it's just an irrational fear so you must be prejudiced and that's how the debate is conducted this is not realism and words just become emptied of content and certainly divorced from their normal meaning and their common sense just try and give a definition of marriage or gender now you can't do it you'll end up writing a complicated academic paper trying to make sense of it and usually failing miserably and talking complete nonsense this isn't realism this definition of gender that we have now is completely divorced from reality it's just a made up thing it means whatever you want it to and that's why I say that this is the looking glass world because what is it we find in the looking glass world well Humpty

Dumpty says it exactly when I use a word Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone it means just what I choose it to mean neither more nor less the question is said Alice Alice in the books of course always represents the voice of reason and common sense the question is said Alice whether you can make words mean so many different things the question is said Humpty Dumpty which is to be master that's all he got it exactly right didn't he don't argue with the egg he got it exactly right that's exactly what people say nowadays gender sexuality marriage Brexit can mean whatever you want it to Brexit is Brexit what's that saying nothing literally it's not saying anything words can mean whatever we want them to because we think that we are the masters of the universe and we can make something true just by asserting it actually mathematicians got into trouble trying to do that about a century ago but the rest of the world doesn't seem to have caught up yet marriage gender free speech tolerance now there's a word that means whatever you want it to there's a very good book by Don Carson called the intolerance of tolerance it's well worth reading it shows that in the name of political correctness and the claim to tolerance we've actually come to a society that's far less tolerant than we had 50 years ago and the pigs had got it right in animal farm as well hadn't they all animals are equal but of course we're more equal than the rest of you we even do it ourselves don't we even the liberal elite we talk about the liberal elite and that means what we want it to of course we can't say we're even ourselves necessarily immune from that but if it means anything it means this that people who claim to make things right who have the wisdom but what their wisdom comes from not from the father of wisdom but who comes from their own minds and hearts people who are claimed in fact that they are more equal than the rest of us there's something else about the looking glass too the red queen explains this if I recall correctly that you have to run very fast to stay in the same place things change very quickly and they change very quickly because things are always getting redefined faith according to Richard Dawkins means believing things with no evidence or even in spite of the evidence and so he devotes several bestsellers to debunking that idea of faith he doesn't actually do it very well he usually ends up contradicting himself but that's what he's aiming at still I suppose if that's what faith is then he's right it does need debunking but that's not what I mean by faith and it's certainly not what Jesus meant by faith either the problem that these neighbours had was not lack of evidence tells us that the scripture tells us that they themselves were amazed in verse 54 they were amazed by Jesus but actually it's a different word it's not the same Greek word the word here that these people were the way in which these people were amazed is the word is ek pleso and it means shocked it's as if somebody had come and hit them and knocked them over as if they'd been hit by a blow they saw the evidence but they just couldn't handle it it shattered their comfortable world and of course we don't have that immediate experience that they had but we have the words of Jesus and the testimony of the apostles and the evidence is there if we can accept it and yet in a sense we can sympathise with those neighbours can't we perhaps being able to fix a door is the meaning of life perhaps this is as good as it gets this isn't a new idea of course the ancient world had its own big Indians and little Indians they were called the Epicureans and Stoics by the time of Jesus they'd been arguing for 300 years or so and you still get much the same arguments now they both agreed that life had no real meaning so what they found to argue about was what's the best way to deal with that is it best just to drown your sorrows hold endless parties and forget about it eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die that's what the Epicureans thought and the [33:04] Stoics on the other hand thought that we have to rise above it we have to make our own meaning we have to become strong and of course in modern times Nietzsche Stoic to the core revived that idea didn't he God

is dead so man is dead man must reinvent himself as a superman Nietzsche as it were is the patron saint of the existentialist and the post-moderns but it's a fantasy we can't reinvent ourselves as superman and the more we try the more mess we get into is becoming increasingly clear superman is a fantasy he lives in the looking glass world and so God is dead becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy doesn't it what you see is what you get like King

Ahaz 700 years earlier these Nazarenes would see no sign and so they got no sign of course they refused to believe what they had they got no sign Jesus didn't do much there it tells us so welcome to the looking glass world the world in which nothing is quite what it seems world world where words mean whenever I want them to where you have to run fast just to stay in the same place and again if you're familiar with the book you'll know that the looking glass world actually is one gigantic game of chess it's a game it's a game where people play but it doesn't really mean anything the point of it is just to get to the other side of the board and become a queen it's a weird place certainly and it has its attractions but it's not really a good place to live is it in Carol's story

Alice came back through the looking glass to the real world and we need to do the same but as those Nazarenes found it's not an easy thing to do we keep being dragged back into the illusion we can't quite cope with it we can't quite get our head around it and so we say well perhaps carpentry is the meaning of life perhaps there's no more to it than that and yet the evidence had been there before them and they chose to ignore it they would see no sign so they did see no sign verse 58 well Alice through the looking glass was based on a real girl but of course Alice through the looking glass is a fictional character she's just as fictional as Superman in fact so she can't lead us out of the looking glass world but we do have a guy we do have a pioneer who has been to check out the route

Hebrews 12 verse 2 we do have a Moses and that pioneer is Jesus if only we could see him for what he was and not say oh he's just another carpenter he's just another purveyor of snake oil just another second rate prophet let's make the mistake that Nazarenes did let's see clearly who Jesus is and let's follow him back to the real world not I say by ignoring the evidence as they did but in fact by studying the evidence studying the testimony of what Jesus said what the apostles said and finding that it does make sense it is possible to believe it is possible to see who Jesus is so let's not make the mistakes the Nazarenes did Jesus is the one who shows us the way