

John the Baptist and doubt

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[0 : 00] John the Baptist, I reckon he was a pretty scary, kind of ultra-religious type that you might go and visit once a lifetime. You might see on a big stage, but he was in the desert and he was dressed in like these clothes made from camel hair.

He's eating wild locusts and honey and I'm like, he's kind of like this crazy Christian that you might come across every now and again and think, oh, I want nothing to do with you because it's just a bit wacky.

But he had a real message to give and people were coming to see him. He was saying, you need to repent. The time is now. Jesus is coming. And people were getting baptized.

He was doing it and he was told that he was to come before Jesus came. A pretty amazing guy in all respects. But he didn't quite understand what Jesus was actually there to do.

He had this image in his mind about what God's kingdom might look like. What might it mean to the Jews? How they might better from it.

[1 : 08] And then suddenly he finds himself in jail. He's thrown in prison by Herod. And he's in chains and he's about to be beheaded. That's a pretty like hard situation to be in.

So, of course, he starts to doubt. He starts to question. What if I baptize the wrong guy? Oh, uh-oh. Like, the rulers that are ruling over the Jews, the Romans that are oppressing them, Herod and his palace, are still in place.

The people that I don't like ruling over us are still in place. And now I'm in prison. Surely I should be the one free and able to do what I want. Now, as a Jew and as a follower of Christ.

Yet Jesus is here. He's preaching. And yet nothing's changing. Is nothing changing? I'm in prison. What's changing? So he gets a message out to Jesus to ask.

You know, are you actually the one? Now, I want you to bear with me this morning. I'm going to do a little comparison between characters that I'm talking about with strawberries. Because that's a lovely British fruit, isn't it?

[2 : 15] And it's a family service. And I panic when it comes to family service. Like, what do I need? What do I do? I need props. So we're going to do strawberries this morning. So bear with me. Right. Who here loves strawberries? Oh, that's a pretty good amount of people.

Do you want to come up and get one? All right. I want you to see. Is this a strawberry? All right. Now, first, I want you to imagine eating it.

Can you imagine eating a strawberry? Can you imagine it bursting between your teeth and the lovely juices running down? Can you imagine it growing on the tree and picking it off? Can you imagine how good a British summer strawberry is?

Just have that image in your head. Here. Here's your strawberry. Can you eat that? Can you hold that up? Here we have a big, juicy strawberry.

Who agrees? Is that a bit cruel, given that child? There's your strawberry. Are you happy with that? No, she's not happy with that.

[3 : 16] I'm sorry. So here we have an image of a strawberry. And that image is a strawberry. Is it not? But it's not the real thing.

Often we have an image of what Jesus is going to do for us or what being a Christian means. So being a father, I would love Joy to grow up as a Christian, my daughter.

I would love her to get married. I'd love her to have a happy life. I'd love her to be just a Christian, like following God and whatever that means.

But often, I must admit that my dream for her is quite a middle-class Christian dream. You know, the whole idea of marriage, settling down, having a family.

That's kind of my parent side of it. I want her to be safe. I want her to be secure. But actually, what does the Bible say about becoming a Christian? Because that's the false image of a Christian. Isn't it?

[4 : 13] What does the Bible say about being a Christian? Well, once when I was working on the Bournville estate as a youth worker, we were working alongside Yatam Methodist Church.

And at one of their youth services, this girl came up to us and said she felt God had spoken to her that night. And we're like, whoa, what is this going to be? And this girl was called Sarah.

And she said, God has called me to a dark place. And we're like, whoa, what is that? She said, I feel like I need to be a missionary. And we're like, okay, well, let's explore it. Let's see what that means over the next few months, years.

And just see how that goes. So she goes home and tells her parents, say, I'm being called to a dark place. I think I'm to go to work with people with AIDS in Africa. Or maybe Afghanistan.

Or maybe, you know, these really dark places. I'm being called to go there. And her parents were like, whoa, okay. Hey, you know, we like you being a Christian, going to church.

[5 : 14] No. Like, how risky do you want to be? What expectations are we putting on our Christian faith? Is it a risky one? Is it a juicy, adventurous one?

Or is it an image of one? And so as a negotiation process followed, and Sarah ended up coming and serving on the Bourneville with us, after school, her parents would drive her from Yatyn and drop her off at the Bourneville Estate in Western Supermare.

And she'd walk around the parks with us, just for a couple hours, talking to young people. And she's a really quiet 15-year-old girl. I think she was 14 at the time. And that was really brave of her.

But she could do things I couldn't. So because she was quiet and on the margins, she'd gather the other quiet children around her. And they would talk with her about things they would never talk to me about. And she had a real place, a ministry there.

And for her, that was the first step of going to a dark place. And it was a bit easier for her parents to swallow than Africa or Afghanistan. You know, those kind of, like, amazing stories you hear of.

[6 : 15] But she still has that calling on her life. And I want Joy to have an adventure. I want her to have an adventure, following an adventurous Jesus. But it's scary, isn't it?

It's scary. So, there's this other amazing story in the Bible. It's a story of Pilate and Barabbas and Jesus.

Do we know this story? So Pilate is an authority. He's a Roman authority at the time. And he's met with this guy called Jesus. And he knows that he is innocent.

He's blameless. He's not worthy of being crucified. So he tries to bargain with the Jewish people. He says, right.

On one hand, you know, I'll bring out this guy called Barabbas. He's a notorious murderer. A violent revolutionary. He's a man who wants the Jewish people freed from under Roman oppression.

[7 : 17] He's a dangerous man. On this other hand, we have Jesus. Which one do you want to go free? Do you know who they vote for? Barabbas.

Oh, and a side note. Do you know who Barabbas's first name is? Do you know what his first name is? It's in one of the Gospels. Jesus. Well done. We've got two Jesuses here.

How crazy. It blows your mind sometimes, the Bible. So you've got two Jesuses. One is... Sorry, I've just left you guys up there. You should have come down. But you can hang out there now.

I'm like... Just notice. We've got two Jesuses. One is a revolutionary, kind of a man-made power struggle. He's the guy who you can expect...

You know what to expect from him. You've got the Jesus, the other Jesus, the Messiah, who's innocent. He hangs up with people on the margins. He's not doing what's expected of him.

[8 : 14] He's dangerous, but in a different way. Because the authorities feel like they can't control him. They don't know what to do with this Jesus guy. On the other hand, we want someone who wants to make Israel great again.

That sounds familiar. You know, it's these kind of political struggles that are going on. They vote for Barabbas. And I'm going to say that Barabbas is like a certain kind of strawberry.

I think that analogy goes on. I feel sorry for you now. Do you want to come and get one of these? What's this going to be? Is this going to be a strawberry? Do you want to pull that off? You don't have to.

It's worth it. Ooh. Is that a strawberry? It is a strawberry. Do you want to take one? Are these strawberries? Can anyone see them?

These are Haribo strawberries. Some people might prefer these. Do you like Haribo strawberries? This is a trick to family services. Get in Haribo. And it all goes well. Yeah, you like strawberries.

[9 : 21] So this is like a synthetic strawberry, isn't it? It's man-made. It's sweet. It's slightly addictive. It's more-ish.

Once you have one, you just want another one, don't you? Yeah, you do. You do. It's just like... It's like... And it gives you a slight high. It makes you feel good. But only for a little time.

It lacks any nutrients, any vitamins. Even if it says it's made with real fruit juice. So... Really? It's not a real strawberry, is it?

And Barabbas is like their saviour kind of figure that they want. They want someone to take back the power. They want a... They want a strawberry.

But they don't want the real thing. They want someone they can control. They want someone who's man-made or person-made. They want... Yeah. I think they prefer Haribo strawberry. Should we hand these around?

[10 : 19] Do you want to take some more? Often we sit on our thrones of hindsight and think, we'd have chosen Jesus Christ.

We'd have chosen the Messiah. But often when it comes to security, to worries of wealth, to worries of our own self-preservation, we do not choose.

That way we often choose the way of control. But then we have Jesus. Like love, he is uncontrollable.

Strawberries, they can spread, can't they? They're quite tenacious. Like, they keep spreading and spreading. They don't like to stay in one spot. He doesn't...

Jesus doesn't follow our plans or do the things we expect. I wish he did do what I expect him to do sometimes. It would save a lot of embarrassment. But maybe you've had those times in your life.

[11 : 23] Maybe a business idea has gone not the way you expected. A relationship has fallen apart. And do you know the biggest cause of relationship and marriage breakdowns is unmet expectations.

Often we enter into a relationship and we're expecting from someone something that is not met. And that fesses inside you. And you're like, it's hard.

But Jesus doesn't meet our expectations. He does things differently. And that is freeing. It's freeing. Because you know what? If we die to our own expectations, if we die to our way of how we want life to be, it's so freeing.

See, Jesus didn't come to liberate the Jews from Roman oppression with force, even though Judas tried to force his hand in that way. He came to free humanity from the power of death, the power of sin, greed, lust, and our broken humanity.

He reported back to John the Baptist, the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised to life, and the good news is being preached to the poor.

[12 : 37] He said nothing about, I'm going to free you from prison. He said nothing about wealth or power. He said, just look what's happening.

So, there is nothing like a real British strawberry, is there? Ta-da! These are Somerset strawberries, I might add. The real deal.

These are juicy, filled with nutrients, but slightly dangerous. Because you never know if you're going to get a bug, do you? Have I washed them? Oh, who might have touched one before you get one?

All these kind of risks play in. Because they're the real thing. They're not, like, often with life, it's not always hygienic, it's not always safe. But if you take a bite, and are willing to try, it's so much better.

And like the Christian faith, that is what it's like. It's like, from the outside, it just appears a bit wacky, a bit like John the Baptist. A bit mad. You think differently, don't you?

[13 : 47] You don't drink wine? What's the deal with that? I drink wine, by the way. I like that. It's not synthetic. It's not man-made. Often we, you know, we have these churches, we have procedures, we have a structure to our service.

These things are man-made. But our God is not man-made. And he does things his own way. And we can be free just to explore and observe what God is doing.

We don't have to force his hand or pretend like we're in charge. So, would you like a real strawberry? And then tell me if that, I better.

I don't know. Don't tell me that. It'll ruin my whole talk.