

What Did You Expect

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] Among the Maasai, he in his Western way would go up to people and say, My name's Harry, what's yours? And they resented that very much because they didn't use names.

And to know somebody's name was to be very personal and intimate with them in a way that was perhaps not appropriate. And so you would say, old man, young man, chief president, executive officer, you know, clerk.

You would use some kind of title, but you wouldn't know the person's name. So he said, among people whom I have been working with for a long time, I don't know their names.

And they don't know mine because it's rude for anybody to ask. Now that sounded to me very much like Wednesday. Because I don't know most of your names and you don't know who I am.

You think you may know who I am because I stand up here and talk, but you don't really. I covered that up pretty well. Well, and I'm aware that it's a difficult kind of thing to know just how to relate.

[1 : 22] So I don't know what you expect when you come here. Jesus was putting this question to the crowds of people from every town, village, city, and the whole of the country that went out in great numbers to hear John the Baptist.

And then he said to them, well, when you went out there, what did you expect? What in fact were you looking for? Why did it go like wildfire through the whole of the country that every village, town, city emptied out in order to hear this man?

What was it that gave him or gave you the kind of curiosity that drove you out to see who he was and find out what he was there for?

So he says, what did you expect? And I would like to tell you what I expect. What I think I'm trying to do up here is to add fuel to the fire.

Now, I want to suggest that in several ways. First, the fire that is spoken of where it says that your faith is more precious than gold, and so it needs to be constantly refined.

[2 : 40] And the process of refining your faith has to be by fire, by encounter with the word of God.

That's one of the things that needs to happen, is that your faith needs to be refined, the faith of us all. And that happens.

Now, lots of people, their faith is kind of low-grade ore at best, and it needs a lot of refining. It needs the dross to be burned away.

I would like you to encounter the fire in terms that, I think John Wesley spoke of it when he said that in an exposition of the epistle to the Galatians, that he heard that his heart was strangely warm, because in that evening he encountered something of the warmth of the love of God in Jesus Christ.

And I'd like you to encounter that fire. I'm impressed by Jeremiah and how he uses fire, because the Lord says to him, I'm going to make your words fire, and the people to whom you speak lumber, and the two are going to come together, and there's going to be a great conflagration.

[4 : 09] Well, such was this man, John the Baptist. He was a person who set people on fire, and it spread throughout the whole of the country that people came to hear him, and they sensed in him something of the fire of God, and the fire that comes from God's Word.

John the Baptist had several duties to perform, and he used some brilliant illustrations to tell you how it all worked.

You know that if you've ever cut down a tree, you know that you're standing here cutting down the tree with the axe, and you take one swing and it takes a nick out, there's a kind of shudder run through the whole tree.

And John the Baptist used that illustration. He said that's what's happening right now. The whole thing that has been standing for a long time, the axe has been put to it, and soon it's going down.

And John the Baptist said that was part of his ministry. I was talking to some children the other day and drawing for them, and I did it very quickly like that, and they said, why don't you slow down and maybe you'll get it better.

[5 : 44] I'm glad you're not that rude. That was the first thing that John the Baptist said, was the axe to the tree. When they talked about Jesus going into Jerusalem, and the people saying that they were the children of Abraham, John said, God could make children of Abraham out of these stones.

He doesn't need you. Very graphic kind of preacher. When the Pharisees came to him, he said, call them a brood of vipers, and asked them how they had known to flee from the wrath to come.

He talked of himself as a voice in the wilderness that nobody would normally listen to. When he talked to people who said, what are we supposed to do?

He said, share your clothing, share your food. When he talked to tax collectors, and they said, what are we to do? He said, don't collect any more than you have a right to.

When he talked to soldiers, and they asked what they were supposed to do, he said, don't extort money. Don't accuse falsely. Be content with your pay. And then, as a kind of climax to his career, he took on King Herod and told him about the immorality of his relationship to his wife, who had previously been his brother's wife, and then he ended up in prison.

[7 : 13] And that was pretty well the end of his ministry, which was very graphic, but very preparatory for something that was to follow it. Well, before this passage that we've read today opens up, several of the disciples of John the Baptist had gone to Jesus and said to him, are you he that should come, or are we to look for somebody else?

Now, that's a profound question, you know, because lots of people have, in our society, been introduced to the person of Jesus and have asked the question, well, is he the one that he claims to be, or should we be looking for somebody else?

And I constantly, in my job as a pastor, go to see people who, having perhaps believed in Jesus for some time, have hit some kind of tragedy in their own life, and they echo the question that John the Baptist asked.

Well, have I put my faith in the wrong person? Jesus, when I needed you, you weren't there. Should I be looking for somebody else?

And a lot of people, I guess, have decided, under circumstances like that, to look for somebody else, or probably even more often it happens that people stop looking at all.

[8 : 39] But this was a very eloquent question, because it came from John, after this amazing life that he had lived, being born of ancient parents, having been brought up more or less out in the country, being a man who was clothed in, what was he clothed in?

And camel's hair, I know some of you have camel's hair coats and think they're pretty good. Well, this wasn't exactly the same. He was clothed in that.

He ate with a great leather girdle, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He would be, I'm sure, a delight to most vegetarians. And so I don't know how they think about locusts.

But this was this very strange man who had this very profound ministry and who now, in ignorance, was locked in a dungeon, awaiting the king's pleasure, who in due course was to have him executed.

And so he began to ask questions. And probably it's a very important point in our faith when we come to ask really profound questions.

[10 : 01] Not avoid the questions, not sidestep them, not ignore them, but ask them. And in our society, we're not even, I don't think we're even allowed to ask those kinds of questions.

But John the Baptist was at the point where he had to ask the question. And he sent word to Jesus and said, Are you he that should come, or do we look for another?

And Jesus sent back a very simple message to him. Tell John that this is what you see happening. And they had seen it in the ministry of Jesus. That you will see that the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

Well, I can imagine John the Baptist saying, Well, do people in prison get out? You know, because when we hear about these miracles, we think, Well, I need one in my life.

I am in line for the next miracle. And I can imagine that many of you, even at this moment, might be saying to yourself, I am directly in line for a miracle.

[11 : 24] And you get the message that, well, this fellow who was blind can see, and this fellow who was lame can walk, and this fellow who was a leper is healed, and this fellow who was dead is raised again, and this person who was beaten down in his poverty has had the good news preached to him.

What's going to happen to me? That's the question. And I think it's a very important question. And I think the difficulty of this whole passage is the answer that Christ gives to the question, and that is no answer at all.

John's circumstances do not change except for one thing, that the evidence of the blind man seeing, the lame man walking, the leper being cured, and the dead being raised, was a sign which was to mark the coming of the Messiah, that Jesus is who he says he is.

And that was really the question that John asked in the first place. Are you he that should come? And when he had this information conveyed to him, that was the answer he was given.

Yes, this is the Messiah. This is the Christ. This is the man. And I'm afraid that the gospel doesn't have much better an answer for you.

[13 : 04] But that's a very sufficient answer, I might add. And I pray that God will give you grace to see that it is a sufficient answer.

The circumstances of your particular life, and I hate to tell you this, because you may be expecting something else, the circumstances of your particular life, are probably not going to alter dramatically.

But, if Christ is the one who should come, the one who was sent by God, the one in whom God is revealed, then ultimately it doesn't matter.

If Christ is who he says he is, then the particular circumstances of your life are manageable. And that's what he said to John the Baptist.

Well, Jesus picked up from this point in the passage that we're looking at, and he raised the thing. Now, he said, I want to tell you who this man John the Baptist is.

[14 : 25] He's got your attention. You remember that later on, Christ was trapped by some people who said to him, after he had done some miraculous things, he said, by what authority are you doing this?

And Jesus said, I'll ask you a question. The baptism of John, was it of God, or was it of men?

And the leaders, the religious leaders, knew that they couldn't answer that question. Because if they did, they spoke what was in their own minds and said it was of men.

Then they knew that the people would rise up against them because they believed it was of God.

And Jesus said, I'm not going to answer the question either as to what authority I speak with.

But it gives that, just that little illustration gives some awareness of the impact that John the Baptist had had on the whole country, that they all knew who he was.

[15 : 31] And so, Jesus asked them, did you come out into the wilderness to see a reed shaken with the wind? Now the answer, of course, is no, they didn't.

I mean, you can see a reed shaken with the wind any time you want. So you didn't come out for that. Did you come out to see a man clothed in soft raiment? No, you didn't, because if you wanted to see such a person, you would have gone to the king's palace, not out into the wilderness.

So he says, did you come out to see a prophet? And he says, yes, you did. A prophet and more than a prophet. Now, remember that when Peter turned to his disciples in Mark chapter 8 and said to them, who do men say that I am?

Some say you are a prophet. You see, they had the expectation that the prophet would come and would show them the way ahead.

Even as we in Canada in 1990 wonder where the prophet is going to come from that will show us the way ahead.

[16 : 41] We think that by asking a whole lot of people that question that we might stir somebody up, that there might rise up among us somebody. but built right into the history of the people of Israel was the expectation that a prophet would come and when that prophet came, he would show them the coming of the kingdom.

And Jesus said, John the Baptist is that prophet. John the Baptist is the messenger from God. John the Baptist is the one who's come to build a highway.

A highway so people from everywhere don't have to struggle through the bush and through the wild, unbroken country to get to the presence of God, but there's going to be a highway and on that

highway people will come into the presence of God and John the Baptist was the man who built that highway to open up access to God.

So that Jesus goes on to say about him that this man is the greatest, that there is nobody greater than this man born of woman.

In other words, if you take all the great people of the earth there isn't anyone who is greater than John the Baptist. He's among the greatest.

[18 : 09] In a book by Jacques A. Lowe where he talks about the advantages of genetic engineering, he said, we know how to do it.

We just haven't any idea as to who we want everybody to be like. You know, it would be a tragedy if there was more than one of me or one of you and you can understand that, can't you?

You would hate anybody else to be in the predicament you're in. and I'd hate anybody. Well, you, it's very difficult to decide, you know, what would happen if we had a room full of Einsteins here today?

You know, I don't know what would happen. I, but they probably wouldn't be here. but this is, this is, this is the uniqueness of this man.

And yet, Jesus says about him, the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he. We're coming to that time of the year when they read that passage from the, from the Apocrypha, let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us.

[19 : 29] You know, that tremendous passage about the great men of history. And we have great men in history, men of tremendous accomplishments, men who in the arts and in drama and in engineering and in all sorts of wonderful ways have made amazing contributions to the whole development of human society.

Really great men. And among those great men is John the Baptist. But then Jesus goes on to say, but John the Baptist is less than the least in the kingdom of God.

And you see, that's upset us all very badly because it now means that the greatest people in our society are probably people that we couldn't identify.

They are probably unknown to us. They are probably strangers. they are probably ignored. But because they are in the kingdom and because God is fulfilling his purpose through them, they become greater than the greatest men in history because they are bringing in a greater kingdom than history can ever produce by itself.

So it's an amazing statement that the contrast that Christ makes about John the Baptist. Then he goes on and talks about the kingdom of God is going to come, but he says that, he says this strange remark, it's a peculiar thing, that the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and men of violence take it by force.

[21 : 20] I think very often when John the Baptist comes and when he points to the kingdom, when he builds the highway, then people come along after him and decide, well now we all know what the goal is, let us use violence to bring that goal about.

And of course that's what the history of the Christian church has been, to bring people violently into the kingdom. And this was from the very beginning.

You see, this is where John the Baptist I think causes us a lot of trouble. Preachers would rather preach like John the Baptist than like Jesus because John the Baptist really put it to them, you know.

And he put the finger to people and showed the decadence and the inhumanity and the greed and all the terrible things about our humanity.

And preachers like doing that. They like to lay it on you, I can tell you. And you get a lot of good out of that. You feel so much better than the rest of those slobs out there who don't understand.

[22 : 31] And that you want, in a sense, by violence to bring in the kingdom. And I think Christ is saying that it doesn't come by violence.

You know, you hear the stories of the native people of Canada who say they have tried everything else and nothing but violence will work. And that's very much the human heart, isn't it?

I've done everything else, there's nothing else I can do, violence must be brought in. And I think people have all the way through history thought that they could bring in the kingdom by violence. And Jesus says you can't. But he says that with John the Baptist something has happened. And then he says if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah.

Now I don't know if you've ever been through a Jewish Seder supper, but the setting up of the Seder supper involves all the family gathering around the table and an empty chair and an open door.

[23 : 41] So that if Elijah comes, there's a place for him. Because they were looking for him to come. And Jesus says to them, if you can believe it, John the Baptist is Elijah.

He is the one who comes to announce the coming of the kingdom. Well, you see, what Christ is saying is that this generation lives at the turning point of history.

The point to which the whole of the Old Testament has prophesied and the point at which the New Testament begins and the kingdom comes in the person of Jesus Christ.

He says, this is the moment. And this is Elijah, whom God had promised would announce this moment. and here he is. And then Jesus says, well, what am I going to say about this generation? We've played the flute to you and you haven't danced. We've sung dirges to you and you haven't mourned. You know, you have avoided this and that you haven't responded to the reality which has confronted this generation.

[25 : 01] they haven't been able to see what God is doing in their generation. And I think the business of our applying our minds and our hearts and exposing our lives to the burning fire of the word of God is that we might be aware of what God is doing in our midst and in our generation.

hard thing to do. The way this generation treated it, Jesus says, was that you're like children playing out in the streets and you sing songs that want everybody to come on, let's dance.

Oh, we don't feel like dancing. Okay, well, let's play funerals. Oh, we don't feel like that either. And so he says that's what's happened in this generation.

John the Baptist has come as a strict ascetic and preached to you from the Old Testament to tell you where you stand before God and you have said, this man has a demon and Jesus has come eating and drinking and you say, this man is a wine-bibber, he is a glutton, he associates with tax collectors, he's, and so you've, you've just been like children and said, I don't want to play.

And Jesus said to them, but wisdom is justified by her actions. You see, I think this is the most sort of profound point in all this.

[26 : 45] I, I think a lot about how is God going to make himself known in history. And this is how he's done it.

He's done it through the ministry of John the Baptist who in a sense opens up the curtain to reveal the Son of Man, even Jesus Christ.

And he says, there he is. What are you going to do with him? And people said, well, that's foolishness. That couldn't possibly be. People have ignored it.

People have refused to respond to it. But Jesus says, wisdom is nevertheless justified by her actions. So, let me just conclude with these questions.

What do you expect? How do you think God is going to speak to this generation? How is he going to make himself known to this generation?

[27 : 50] How's it going to happen? Is there a way that we can bring in the kingdom through violence?

No, because we've tried it. And it doesn't work. the church has sought power and prestige among people, and that hasn't brought the kingdom.

So, that doesn't work. Then the third question, which is perhaps more of a personal question, is, what would you do if you found it?

how would you respond? If you suddenly discover, yes, this is it.

And that, you see, is what Jesus wants to leave you with, to leave his own generation with. It's been made clear to you, there's nothing hidden about it.

[28 : 58] It's an open secret. Here it is. How are you going to respond? And, you may be, we may be in our generation, like the children who say, we don't want to play.

You know, I don't want to get involved. But, we have to, we ultimately are responsible for how we answer that question, because, one way or another, we are responding.

So that, let me just give you one final picture. You know, and, here it is. This is John in the dungeon. There he is, you see, and he gets the answer. And the answer concerns who the person of Christ is. he gets, and he either finds his consolation in that, because that's all he gets, or he's lost.

And the only answer for you, in terms of the gospel, is that, if Jesus is who he says he is, then you have reason to be very grateful, despite your circumstances.

[30 : 20] you have every reason to give thanks. And that's the message. That's why it's important for us to listen to John the Day.

Thank you very much for listening to me. Thank you.