

The Challenge of Jesus for Fickle People

Thomas Robinson, *Following or Rejecting Jesus*, 2, September 29, 2013

Matthew 11:7-24 [Cf Luke 7:24-35, 10:13-14]

⁷ As they went away, **Jesus** began to speak to the crowds concerning John:
“What did you go out into the **wilderness** to see? **A reed shaken by the wind?**

⁸ What then did you go out to see? **A man dressed in soft clothing?**

Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in **kings’ houses**.

⁹ What then did you go out to see? **A prophet?**

Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.

¹⁰ This is he of whom it is written,

*‘Behold, I send **my messenger** before your face,
who will **prepare your way** before you.’* [Malachi 3:1]

¹¹ Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen **no one greater** than John the Baptist. Yet the **one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he**.

¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now **the kingdom of heaven** has suffered **violence**, and **the violent** take it by force (seize it for their own advantage).

¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, **he is Elijah who is to come**. [Mal. 4:5] ¹⁵ He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

¹⁶ But to what shall I compare **this generation?** It is like **children** sitting in the marketplaces and calling to their playmates,

¹⁷ *‘**We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.**’*

¹⁸ For **John** came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, **‘He has a demon.’**

¹⁹ The **Son of Man** came eating and drinking, and they say, **‘Look at him!**

‘A glutton and a drunkard,’ a friend of tax collectors and sinners!
Yet wisdom is justified by her deeds.”

²⁰ Then he began to denounce/reproach the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because **they did not repent** (change their way of thinking).

²¹ “Woe to you, **Chorazin!** Woe to you, **Bethsaida!** For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.

²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.

²³ And you, **Capernaum**, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you.”

Deuteronomy 21:18-20

¹⁸ “If a man has a stubborn and rebellious son ... ¹⁹ then his father and his mother ...²⁰ shall say to the elders of his city, ‘This our son is stubborn and rebellious; ... **he is a glutton and a drunkard.**’”

Matthew 9:10-11

¹⁰ And as **Jesus reclined at table** in [Matthew’s] house, behold, **many tax collectors and sinners** came and were reclining with Jesus and his disciples. ¹¹ And when the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with **tax collectors and sinners?**”

Matthew 13:13-14

¹³ “This is why I speak to them in parables, because **seeing they do not see**, and **hearing they do not hear**, nor do they **understand**. ¹⁴ Indeed, in their case the **prophecy of Isaiah** is fulfilled that says: *‘You will indeed hear but never understand, and you will indeed see but never perceive.’*” [Isa 6:9]



Going Out to See John

A startling passage! Matthew has just told of John in prison (by Herod Antipas) asking if Jesus is “the one to come.” Jesus began his Galilee ministry when John was arrested (Mt 4:12). Many of his followers had been stirred by John; some were disciples.

Far from being offended by John’s question, Jesus praises John. But just as John must “see” the “deeds of the Messiah,” so also all of Jesus’ followers. Perceiving a reality that changes the way they/we see everything else. It’s difficult! Usually, it works the opposite way. We fit Jesus into patterns we already know. Jesus begins by challenging them to think about going to see John. You didn’t go to see a kinglet like Herod (Rome’s power)— a reed. A prophet? Yes! But more. What did you see? His meaning? Who he is in the Great Story of God’s work? What’s happening.

By challenging them to see John, he pushes them to open their eyes to see Jesus’ own identity.

A Turn of History from John to Jesus

It’s hard to recognize a change of history when you’re too close. John and Jesus both proclaimed the coming of God’s kingdom. Jesus supported John, was baptized by John. They were both part of the same story but in different roles, at different moments. John was the first true prophet since the prophets of scripture, also the last, the greatest. But something new was breaking in, with new shape and power, John was the great climax of the old. But now the new.

If you can really see the greatness of John – in scripture context, the great story, Elijah to come; then that may open your eyes to see what is breaking in. It’s the same story, but a new era.

Jesus’ Dangerous Kingdom Message

John in prison shows the concrete danger of talking about a new kingdom. We so spiritualize the message that it’s hard for us to imagine. There was already a king (Caesar & Herod); no room for another authority. Herod would soon put out a warrant for Jesus’ arrest (Lk 13:31). Jesus speaks cryptically of being Messiah/King: John is Elijah, do you “have ears to hear”?

But there were others who were calling for God’s kingdom, and with long-standing “Maccabean” ideas about how the kingdom must be regained by zeal and force, driving out the Gentiles, purifying the land and temple. To them, Jesus was a puzzle and a traitor. Go the second mile? Really? Eating with tax-collectors? A kingdom can only be seized by violence (v.12).

Jesus proclaimed God’s kingdom in a way that challenged Herod and aristocratic Temple authorities as well as the zealots for violent revolution. He enacted a kingdom to overthrow both and more, to challenge every human power structure, to break the power of death itself.

What Do You See in Jesus?

People then like people now have a hard time making sense of Jesus, taking in God’s whole story.

We have expectations, patterns of the possible. We can recognize and respect a prophetic voice, a moral teacher, a philosopher, a spiritual guide, a revolutionary, a lawgiver, a king.

But what of someone who by his own identity and by actions mysterious to us (cross and resurrection) enacts a new era of the world, to be unfolded in the lives of his followers?

What of someone who calls for incredible perfection of life, but who has immense grace and welcome for all the sinful and broken people around him? What of a king with no possessions, no army, no distinctly political agenda? Jesus challenged his own disciples even till today.

John? A prophet. But something more—a demon. Jesus? A rebellious son. A glutton, a drunkard.

The cities don’t change their thinking. They’re hotbeds for men of violence, till destroyed.

Go back to Jesus. Watch. Listen. Who he is; what he says; what he does change everything.