

Mat. 11 Sermon – What did you Expect?

For those of you who are keen coffee drinkers, let me explain something to you.

There are other hot beverages – I know, I know, it's a shock. We live in Sydney after all – coffee culture is almost impossible to escape. The city doesn't wake without its coffee. Coffee addiction is a rite of passage. It's the grown-up, sophisticated equivalent of vegemite on toast for Sydneysiders. Good coffee is almost as ubiquitous as tap water.

Now, I'm not saying that you, a coffee drinker, set out to deliberately persecute and exclude those of us who don't particularly enjoy a mouthful of tar in the morning. But what you, my coffee drinking friend, don't see is that the whole coffee thing – the grinds and blends and short blacks and flat whites, that wafting, inescapable aroma, those bearded blokes with beanies who deal out their quick fixes to caffeine junkies lined up along the footpath outside some hole in the wall, the way you all seem to be able to speak and decipher some strange and exclusive language whenever someone calls for coffee orders, the way your barista knows your name and your order; I know you don't mean it, the fact is you don't see it, but to those on the outside – the privilege of your status as a coffee drinker is oppressive.

There are, believe it or not, those of us who prefer other hot drinks. There are the hot chocolate lovers, the tea drinkers, the chai enthusiasts.

You probably don't see us sitting quietly in the corner, trying to take a quiet moment. You probably don't see past the frenzied choreography of the staff behind that churching, steaming, demanding, piece of coffee-producing industrial technology.

No, we're invisible. It's a coffee drinker's world.

There are something like 7000 independent cafés in this city. And yet, I can count on one hand the number of places I know in Sydney where I can get a decent cup of tea. There are probably two places I can confidently go to for a chai. And only one where I know I'll enjoy the hot chocolate.

So, if you invite me to a café these days, I'll order a coffee. It's easier just to conform. I'm done having my expectations dashed. Ordering a hot chocolate or a chai only to find myself sipping a warm cup of insipid sugar-milk. Looking forward to a fragrant, freshly steeped pot of tea and being charged \$4 for a tea bag.

When I order a hot drink that's not coffee, the inevitable result is disappointment. My naïve hopes of a drink, that's rich and warm and well-balanced are dashed. There's a gaping gulf between my expectation and reality.

Sometimes I find myself thinking, “Surely this place has nice non-coffee options” and I’ll take a chance and order something. but it’s nearly always disappointing and Charlotte will look at me and say, “Well, what did you expect?”

I’m sure you know what it’s like, that experience of dissonance between expectation and reality

Like when the burgers on the signs of the takeaway shop so look plump and sumptuous and the burger in your hand is limp and soggy.

Like when the clothes you ordered online looked spectacular on the model but now, they seem to pinch or hang loose in all the wrong places.

Sometimes there’s a big difference between expectation and reality and sometimes that can be hard to come to terms with.

And – Ok, so here’s the point of my ridiculous rant - Jesus didn’t meet everyone’s expectations. And that was significant. He could be really hard to come to terms with. He didn’t meet the expectations of the crowds or the pharisees or even John the Baptist. There’s always been a kind of scandalous quality about Jesus that breaks out of the moulds we cast for him. He doesn’t always line up with the expectations we bring to him.

What did you think about John the Baptist’s question of Jesus when the Bible was read to us? Because it seems like the reality of Jesus’ ministry didn’t exactly meet John’s expectations.

If you have Matthew chapter 11 in front of you, have a look at verse 2 –

John 11:2 - When John,^a who was in prison,^b heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come,^a or should we expect someone else?”

Now, I don’t know about you but to me, on first reading, this seems like a pretty surprising question. Back in chapter 3, when we’re first introduced to John as the hairy, insect eating eccentric desert preacher – we read that at the moment he baptises Jesus in the Jordan river, he bears witness to a visual and auditory sign from God – Matthew 3:16 and 17 say,

John 3:16-17 - As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened,^a and he saw the Spirit of God^b descending like a dove and alighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven^a said, “This is my Son,^b whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”^c

I mean, if there was anyone, in this story so far, with confirmation from God that this Jesus is the one

God had promised to come as a fulfilment of all the prophetic hopes, it would be John, right? John should have confidence that Jesus is the one to expect.

So why does he start to doubt?

Well, one obvious factor that contributes to John's uncertainty is intimated in our passage today – John is in prison. Now, I personally haven't spent any meaningful length of time in gaol but I imagine the experience would be enough to have you questioning things. It would make sense that John's experience of incarceration, of frustrating inactivity and injustice when he expected so much more was enough to get him wondering if this Jesus was really the one he expected.

But it's not just John's situation that's playing with his mind. There seems to be a conceptual dissonance between John's expectations and the actual flavour of Jesus' ministry. When Jesus reflects on John's ministry after John's followers leave, in verses 7-15, he frames John as a prophet at the turning point of history. A high point in the story so far, but a representation of something old and now superseded. The Kingdom of Heaven, The Kingdom of God, that's on the lips of Jesus and on display in the life of Jesus, is something new. And so, as John sits, languishing in gaol, his expectations, of what it would look like for God's messiah to break into our world, are not satisfied by the reports he hears about what Jesus is up to...or not up to, as the case may be.

There's something about the nature of Jesus' ministry that's uncomfortable and unexpected for John, that seems all wrong, almost like it's not enough.

From what we can gather from Matthew's account, John, a fiery preacher of judgement, expected something cataclysmic from Jesus – and this gradual and gentle restoration of people's lives that characterised Jesus' ministry sounded rather unimpressive and disappointing.

Let me show you what I mean, flick back to chapter 3 of Matthew.

The last time we met John was here, preaching a message of judgement in the Judean desert.

Matt 3:1-12 “In those days John the Baptist^a came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea ² and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven^a has come near.” ³ This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah:

“A voice of one calling in the wilderness,
‘Prepare the way for the Lord,
make straight paths for him.’”^{a a}

Matt. 3:4 John's^a clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist.^b His food was locusts^c and wild honey. ⁵ People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. ⁶ Confessing their sins, they were baptized^a by him in the Jordan River.

Matt. 3:7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers!^a Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?^b ⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.^a ⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.'^a I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.^a

Matt. 3:11 "I baptize you with^a water for repentance.^a But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with^b the Holy Spirit^b and fire.^c ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."^a

It's clear that John was a student of the great prophetic tradition of apocalyptic judgement – God is coming as judge, the great day of the Lord is coming – that great and terrible day when God will judge the sins of his people and the sins of the nations. That's John's expectation.

Earlier in the service we read a little from the prophet Malachi, and you might have noticed that Malachi's vision of God's coming was a frightening one.

Mal 3:1 - "'I will send my messenger,^a who will prepare the way before me.^b Then suddenly the Lord^c you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant,^d whom you desire,^e will come,'" says the LORD Almighty.

But who can endure^a the day of his coming?^b Who can stand^c when he appears?"

The prophet Malachi, speaking probably 4-500 years before Jesus, warns an unfaithful audience that God is going to send a messenger to precede him in judgement. And...

"who can endure^a the day of his coming?^b Who can stand^c when he appears?"

Later on in chapter 4, Malachi declares...

Mal 4:1 - ““Surely the day is coming;^a it will burn like a furnace.^b All the arrogant^c and every evildoer will be stubble,^d and the day that is coming will set them on fire,^e” says the LORD Almighty. “Not a root or a branch^f will be left to them.”

Malachi’s words here represent a strong tradition of biblical prophecy – a tradition of apocalyptic judgment - and right at the end of his book, he leaves us with these words...

Mal 4:5 - ““See, I will send the prophet Elijah^a to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes.^b”

That’s the tradition John’s ministry taps into. In fact, Jesus confirms this connection between this anticipated day of the Lord and John the Baptist by equating John with the Elijah figure who was said to proceed the great and terrible day. He does that in in verse 14 of our text:

Matt 11:14 – “**And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come.^a**”

So, John came preaching this same message of the apocalyptic judgement of God. And he believed Jesus was the one to usher in this great and terrible day of the Lord.

And everything looks so promising to John until it doesn’t anymore. John’s expectations are big and frightening. Jesus’ ministry seems comparatively gentle and insignificant.

So, as he sits in his prison cell, reflecting back on those heady days of his public ministry, he starts to wonder, was I wrong? Where’s the justice? Where’s the burning fire that licks up the arrogant and the evildoer like dry stalks of grass?

Here’s my expectation, Jesus. Where’s the reality?

You’ll see Jesus’ response to John’s query in verse 4.

Matt 11:4-6 – “Jesus replied, “**Go back and report to John what you hear and see:⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy^a are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor.^{a 6} Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.”^a**”

John’s imagination had been so full of judgment, like an unquenchable fire – Jesus speaks of healing, of seeing and hearing and walking again, of life where there was death, of good news being proclaimed to the poor. It’s a very different vision of God’s work in the world, one of restoration, of renewal. Jesus is drawing on another prophetic tradition – the prophetic tradition of restoration.

Like Isaiah’s declaration in chapter 29:

Isaiah 29:18

“In that day^a the deaf^b will hear the words of the scroll,
and out of gloom and darkness^c
the eyes of the blind will see.^d”

Or later in Isaiah 61:

Isaiah 61:1-2a

“The Spirit^a of the Sovereign LORD^b is on me,
because the LORD has anointed^c me
to proclaim good news^d to the poor.^e
He has sent me to bind up^f the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom^g for the captives^h
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^a
² to proclaim the year of the LORD’S favor^a”

It’s like Jeremiah’s anticipation of a new way of relating to God

Jeremiah 31:33 –

“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the LORD.
“I will put my law in their minds^a
and write it on their hearts.^b
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.”

And Ezekiel’s vision of restoration

36:26 – “I will give you a new heart^a and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from
you your heart of stone^b and give you a heart of flesh.^c ²⁷ And I will put my Spirit^a in
you and move you to follow my decrees^b and be careful to keep my laws.^c ²⁸ Then
you will live in the land I gave your ancestors; you will be my people,^a and I will be
your God.^b”

This is the prophetic vision of restoration, of renewal, that’s clearly on display in every
interaction that Jesus has with those in need of God’s grace around him.

Now, it would be a mistake to draw too strong a distinction between these two prophetic
traditions – apocalyptic judgement and restoration – it’s not like they’re opposed to each other,
they do go together. They’re both ways God shapes our expectations of his intentions for our
world and they’re both important frames for understanding the significance of Jesus – but it
seems that John, the disenfranchised fire and brimstone preacher, needed reminding that God’s
work is not just about judgment for the wicked, ultimately, it’s a work of restoration, of renewal.
John needed reminding that God isn’t just about bringing an end to injustice, it’s about making
all things new.

And this prophetic tradition of restoration, according to Jesus, is the way to understand what
he’s on about. If you want evidence that he’s the one we’ve been looking for all along, put your
restoration glasses on. Focus in on the power of God at work in Jesus’ attention to the

oppressed, the poor, the sick and the marginalised. When you witness the blind being given sight, that's confirmation that the king of God's kingdom is here. When you witness the sick cured, that's confirmation that the king of God's kingdom is here. When you witness the dead raised to life, that's confirmation that the king of God's kingdom is here. When you witness the good news being preached to the poor, that's confirmation that the king of God's kingdom is here.

When I read the gospels, I find myself frequently struck by the way the cataclysmic, earth shattering, arrival of God the son into the created order to change the course of history and usher in a new way of relating to God was so tactile and local and intensely personal and human. It was so humble. There was a man with a skin disease, ritually and socially unclean. He speaks to Jesus. Jesus touches him and he's healed. There's a woman suffering from a condition that had caused her to bleed for 12 years, ritually and socially unclean. Desperate for some healing effect, she secretly reaches out to touch Jesus' cloak but Jesus calls her forward for a personal encounter. He calls her daughter. He restores her body and her dignity and tells her to go in peace. There are men, tormented by evil, living alone among the tombs with reputations of violence. When they're confronted by Jesus, the demonic forces that compel them strike fear into their hearts, fear of torture and retribution. Jesus frees them from all that oppression.

And maybe these stories feel small and distant to you. Maybe you expect something a little more earth-shattering from God – like, why doesn't he just do something big and obvious to everyone instead of hiding behind ancient texts, silent in the face of our tears and injustice and conflict and pain in the world. Why doesn't he just show himself. Leave us in no doubt. Fix things up.

But he did turn up. And that's his answer to John. Look John. Look at these lives transformed, renewed, restored. Look at these people, who were forgotten and on the outside – alienated from God and from their communities. Look at the way they enter into life. That's the evidence of the kingdom – of God's work in the world - that Jesus wants John to see.

But, of course, it wasn't just John that found Jesus' ministry disorienting. There were lots of people perplexed by Jesus – even offended by Jesus, and for different reasons.

There are lots of reasons why people might dismiss Jesus. And a lot of those reasons have to do with the expectations we have of what God might be like or of what the ultimate good is or how God should respond to certain situations.

Jesus compares his generation to children playing games in the streets, singing songs and expecting the crowds, as they pass by, to dance to their tunes.

In verses 18 and 19, he points out the way people would use conflicting arguments to confirm their biases about God's activity in their day.

At one moment, they'd reject John the Baptist as a messenger from God because he was so absent from society – “For John came neither eating^a nor drinking,^b and they say, ‘He has a demon.’” And the next moment, they reject Jesus because he made a point of being with people – “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.’^a”.

What Jesus seems to be making fun of is the tendency for people, especially in groups, to be inconsistent in the way we make judgments about things – to process information by interpreting it to conform with the way we want things to be.

It's a phenomenon known as confirmation bias. And we all do it. We have a preconceived notion of the way things are and we have a tendency to pick and choose and manipulate the evidence that comes to us to reinforce those pre-existing beliefs rather than have them challenged.

And Jesus sees this in the crowds of people that weren't willing to see that God was at work, both in John's ministry and in Jesus' ministry. That was a particular challenge for the people who came face to face with Jesus. And it's a significant challenge for us today as well. Are we willing to do business with Jesus for who he is? Or do we expect him to fit into our preconceived moulds and either dismiss him outright or reimagine him in a way that's foreign to the historical Jesus, as he comes to us through the pages of scripture. I suggest if, when you're reading the New Testament, you find that the Jesus you're coming face to face with makes you uncomfortable, interrogate that triggered impulse. Could it be that your expectations need widening or adjustment, or even overturning?

Now, at this point, you might be looking at Matthew chapter 11 and thinking, he's only covered half of the chapter. That's true, let me just say a quick word about these two statements Jesus makes here. They're important, Matthew records them both in connection with his statements about John the Baptist and the crowds, before he moves on to talk about the events of another day in chapter 12. And both statements, draw on these two prophetic traditions we've been discussing already. His statement in verses 20-24 draw strongly on the tradition of apocalyptic judgement and his statement in verses 25-30 draw on the tradition of restoration.

Both these statements are prophetic utterances themselves, and they both relate to the ways in which people respond to Jesus and I want them to challenge your response to Jesus.

So, what I'm going to do to finish my sermon is just read these two prophetic utterances of Jesus, one about judgment and one about restoration, and really let Jesus speak for himself. As I read them, I want you to listen for how Jesus draws on these two traditions to challenge you in your response to him. If at any point, you find yourself confronted by something he's saying take a note of that and sit down with that idea later, prayerfully, either by yourself or with someone else and start to do some of that work of interrogating your expectations. Is there something in the way that you see the world or the way that you understand God, that's challenged by what Jesus has to say? Are there ways in which your vision of God's work in the

world, or maybe your participation in that work, needs to shift in light of the Jesus we meet here in the pages of scripture?

So, here's Jesus, pressing us about our response to him and holding out his hand to us with a life-giving vision of restoration:

Matt 11:20-30 – “Then Jesus began to denounce the towns in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. ²¹ “Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!^a For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon,^b they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.^c ²² But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you.^a ²³ And you, Capernaum,^a will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades.^a ^b For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. ²⁴ But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you.”^a

Matt. 11:25 At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father,^a Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children.^b ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do.

Matt. 11:27 “All things have been committed to me^a by my Father.^b No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.^c

Matt. 11:28 “Come to me,^a all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.^b ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you and learn from me,^a for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.^b ³⁰ For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”^a