

[Matthew 11:1-19](#)

I once succeeded a previous minister in an appointment who was described to me as a Marmite minister. In other words, he divided opinion and everyone had an opinion about him. You couldn't sit on the fence. You were for or against. He had that effect on everyone.

And in a similar way, John the Baptist was a Marmite minister. You had to take sides over what he preached. Some of that will come out as we think about this week's reading.

But to our surprise, this story shows us another side of him. The vulnerable, struggling side of his personality.

This means we're going to divide up four things I want to say about this passage into two halves. In the first half we're going to think about John's response to Jesus, and here we're going to see signs of the weaknesses with which he wrestled.

In the second half we're going to examine two ways people respond to John, and there we'll see the Marmite minister in all his glory.

Firstly, then, two ways in which John responded to Jesus.

The **first** response John makes to Jesus in our reading is **doubt**.

²When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples ³to ask him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?'

Doesn't that seem astonishing? John has been preaching that the Messiah is coming and that people should prepare. We know from earlier in Matthew that he recognised his cousin Jesus as that Messiah by the way he saw himself as unworthy to baptise him (3:11-15). So why does he even need to send his disciples with this question?

I think the clue is found in the opening words of verse 2: 'When John, *who was in prison ...*' Things have gone wrong for John. This is not how he planned it. His fearsome preaching has got him in deep trouble with the political authorities. And of course, we know how it will end.

In such strained and stressed circumstances John begins to doubt. Does my imprisonment mean I got it wrong all along?

I have been in situations like that. Have you? Not in prison and likely to lose my life, but times when I thought I knew God's will and then everything seemed to go wrong. I began to doubt.

One such occasion for me was before going to theological college. I have told you before some of the amazing stories of how God provided the money for me to go when I was denied a grant from my local authority and when I lost my appeal against the refusal of that grant.

Looking back, it is a wonderful story of God's provision. But when I was at the in-between stage, with no grant and far from enough savings of my own, I too began to doubt.

It's not that doubt is a good thing, but it is understandable. I follow the Christian thinker Os Guinness in saying that doubt is not the same as unbelief, because doubt is where our faith is in two minds and unbelief has no faith.

What a gift it is, then, to read Jesus' response to the question:

⁴ 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 are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.'

If you are struggling with doubt in your faith at present, bring your questions to Jesus. Ask him to resolve them. He loves to do so.

John's **second** response to Jesus is very similar to doubt: it is **disappointment**. There is a note in his questioning of 'This is not how it was meant to be. Israel was meant to turn back to her God when the Forerunner and then the Messiah came. Yes, some have certainly turned back, but there is still opposition. That's why I'm in prison. How does that fit in the divine plan?'

Many people lose their faith when they feel God has disappointed them. They believe he has let them down at a crucial time in their lives. Someone they loved fell ill and died young. Their marriage broke up, or maybe they lost all hope of ever marrying in the first place. There can be many other things, too.

Jesus sends back that message detailing the great things he is doing, and also describes John to the crowd as a prophet and more than a prophet. But prophets are people who at least in part live with unfulfilled hopes as they proclaim what God wants to do. It is the tension of being a prophet that you

declare that God will perform certain actions but you don't always get to see them yourself.

So John must live with disappointment in the short term. It isn't that the mission has failed, but it is that before the end of all things it is incomplete.

Jesus will disappoint us, too. We need that prophetic perspective that disappointments now are not the end of the story. They may be terrible things. But the story of God does not end in darkness. It ends in his victory.

Then we have **two ways in which people responded to John**.

The **first** of these is something I am going to call **determination**. I'll pick out one verse to summarise this:

¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been subjected to violence, and violent people have been raiding it.

What do you make of a verse like that? If it's any comfort to you, I remember this verse being singled out in New Testament Greek classes at college as being one of the very hardest to translate in the whole New Testament!

But let's cut to the chase and say I believe this is about people who are very determined in their positive response to the message of John and then of Jesus.

One scholar puts it like this:

Jesus regularly borrowed images from his society and applied them in shocking ways, and thus may speak favourably here of *spiritual* warriors who were storming their way into God's kingdom now. One second-century Jewish tradition praises those who passionately pursue the law by saying that God counts it as if they had ascended to heaven and taken the law forcibly, which the tradition regards as greater than having taken it peaceably. These were the people actively following Jesus, not simply waiting for the kingdom to come their way.¹

So I simply want to ask: how are we showing determination and passion in our response to the kingdom of God? Has God given us a great zeal for some aspect of his kingdom work, and if so, are we pursuing it?

It could be that you want to see people find faith in Christ – so are you sharing your faith actively? It could be that you care passionately about the eradication of injustice in the world – so are you getting your hands dirty with that one? It could be that you long to see relationships healed and people reconciled – so are you putting in the quiet, patient, and resilient work behind the scenes which that needs?

Maybe it's something else. But what is important is that we find how God wants us to respond to the Gospel in a determined and passionate way.

The **second** way in which people responded to John was by a **decision**.

Honestly, says Jesus, some of you can't be pleased. You won't dance to the music of the pipe and nor will you grieve when a dirge is sung. You don't like John's austere lifestyle and yet you condemn me when I enjoy a good party (verses 16-19). There is no pleasing some people.

And there is no pleasing such people because they want to make every excuse possible to avoid making a decision about the message first John and then later Jesus proclaim.

Ultimately, no-one can sit on the fence when it comes to John and to the One he preached about, Jesus himself. In fact, to sit on the fence is to choose against God's kingdom.

John would say to us, if we've been putting off that decision about following the Messiah, it's time to stop doing that now. It's urgent and crucial, he says, that we make up our minds about Jesus.

Some of us cover up our refusal to get off the fence by manufacturing respectable churchgoing lives. We look for all the world like a dedicated follower of Jesus, but we are in fact using religious behaviour as a cover for our failure to declare for Christ.

And therefore I cannot finish my words today without putting out that challenge. Is anyone listening to this avoiding making that commitment to Jesus Christ that John urges us to do?

Remember, this is a Marmite matter: you have to decide one way or the other.

¹ Craig S Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p340.