

Sermon 11 December 2022

Matthew 11:2-11

John the Baptist has been imprisoned. He hears what Jesus has been doing and he sends a few of his followers to ask Jesus if he really is the Messiah or should they be waiting for someone else. I find this to be so very interesting. After all, it wasn't so long ago that John was preparing everyone for the coming of the Messiah and then when Jesus appears to John on the banks of the River Jordan, John hails him as the Messiah. I quote from John 1:29. *'The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world! He is the one I was talking about."'*

But now it looks as though John is having his doubts; he is not too sure. He wants confirmation. How human is that. I am sure we can all relate to John's momentary lapse of faith, because that is essentially what it is. How often, when the dice are not rolling our way, when the going becomes particularly arduous, do we question God, or even, heaven forbid (excuse the pun) doubt God's existence? How often have I heard when someone is dealing with adversity, Where is God? If God really does exist, why does he allow this to happen? It is an understandable question. It is a very human question.

If you will excuse me for getting a little personal here, but I have to be honest and admit that on more than one occasion throughout this year as we have battled to get our church build under way, as we have encountered numerous obstacles as we struggle to commence construction on a project that is to be built in God's name and for God's purpose, have I railed against God. Where are you, God? Why aren't you doing something about this?

Now, don't get me wrong, I am not doubting his existence. After all, it is a tad difficult to be angry with someone that you don't actually believe exists. But I do find myself echoing the cry of Jesus on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Now if Jesus can utter such a cry, I think it is ok for me, and in fact, for us all, to utter such a cry. It is a plea that I am sure everyone of us has voiced, on probably more than one occasion.

In the end, Jesus knew exactly where he was going and that he was in God's hands. Similarly, we also, no matter how dire how circumstance might be, need that have that faith God is there for us and God will come through for us. But gosh, it is hard at times.

I am reminded of that story about a man who slipped and fell off a cliff while hiking on a mountaintop. Luckily he was able to grab a branch on his way down. Holding on for dear life, he looked down only to see nothing but rocks way below him. He looked up to the edge of the cliff from where had fallen. Panicked, he yelled, 'Help! Help! Is anybody there? Help!'

A booming voice spoke up (It could only be God!), 'I am here, and I will save you if you believe in me.' 'I believe! I believe!' yelled back the man. 'If you really believe me, then let go of the branch and I will save you.'

The young man, looked down. Seeing the rocks below, he quickly looked back up and shouted, 'Is anybody else there?'

I have a degree of sympathy for the young man, and I have to ask myself, 'Would I have the faith to let go of that branch?' My friends, we need to let go of that branch and put ourselves completely in God's hands. As the psalmist says in Psalm 118:5, *'In my distress I prayed to the Lord, and the Lord answered me and rescued me.'* Imprint that verse on your brain. Every one of us experiences distress of varying degrees. At those times, that verse should be your rallying cry.

We need to take heart from the words of James, *'God blesses people who endure testing.'* James 1:12. Another verse to imprint on your brain.

In the end, faith gives us hope, and without hope, we have nothing. I remind you of the story of the 12-year-old African girl who lived in a village that had was experiencing a severe drought. There had been no rain for months and the crops had completely dried up. The village elders decided to hold a prayer meeting to pray for rain, so one hot afternoon the villages assembled in the town hall. The meeting was just about to get under way when this little girl walks in. She makes her way right up to the front to take a seat. Outside, there was not a cloud in the sky, and the little girl was carrying an umbrella!

That my friends, is faith and hope. The theme for our first week of Advent was hope. There is no doubt that Christ brings hope, but we have to play our part and believe. On Advent Sunday we lit the candle of hope. Today I have my symbol of hope. (*Open umbrella*) They say it is bad luck to open an umbrella inside but my God is far more powerful than any superstition.

Let me finish with a benediction from Romans 15:13. *'So I pray that God, who gives you hope, will keep you happy and full of peace as you believe in him. May you overflow with hope through the power of the Holy Spirit.'* Amen.