



The Round Church at  
**St Andrew the Great**  
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached  
on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> April 2006  
by Mark Ashton

10p

Matthew chapter 11:1-6

**Jesus: predicted, but unpredictable**

**Introduction**

As we start a new series of morning sermons, let's begin by looking at what is actually one word in 11:6: "***Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.***" 'fall away' is quite a hard term to translate: It would be "Blessed is the person who is not scandalised by Me" more literally. Or "Blessed is the person who does not stumble over Me", "Blessed is the person who is not tripped up by Me" (like a tap tackle on the rugby field). "Blessed is the person who does not take offence at Me, does not find Me offensive, does not find Me a problem". But who could find this man (doing the things described in verse 5) a problem? Why should Jesus cause offence? Why should He upset people?

And yet clearly He does. Any discussion about Him quickly divides people from one another in their opinion of Him. Why should such a wonderful person be so divisive?

In the Muslim world people do not disagree about the person of the prophet Mahomet, nor in the Buddhist countries do they argue over Gautama the Buddha, nor in China over Confucius, nor in communist regimes over Karl Marx, in the way people in so-called Christian countries divide over the person of Jesus. And a close look at Matthew 11:1-6 may help us to see why.

**1) Jesus—the Teacher** (v 1)

***After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee*** (v 1). Jesus' contemporaries (like John the Baptist) and people ever since have been fascinated with His miracles. But Jesus' own priority was clear. When, early in Mark's gospel, the disciples interrupted Jesus' early

morning prayer time to tell him that everyone in the town of Capernaum was looking for Him, after He had done many healings there the previous evening, ***Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so that I can preach there also. That is why I have come"*** (Mark 1:38). Jesus came to preach, to teach us what we do not know. So He did not come first and foremost to tell us about ourselves (which we all do know something about already). He came to teach us about God, because, without God's own revelation, we can know nothing about God at all.

A small child was diligently drawing one day when his mother asked him what it was. "I'm drawing God", the boy replied firmly. "But", said his mum, "No one knows what God looks like". "I know", said the boy, "but they will when I've finished". Well, no one knew what God looked like, until Jesus made Him known to us. Of course, His teaching was in deed as well as in words—and in mighty deeds at that—but He was first and foremost a teacher, a communicator about God. It is unmissable in 11:1: ***After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.***

Is Jesus first and foremost a teacher for you and me? I don't mean has He been a teacher for us? One schoolteacher was enthusing to his class about the class photograph: "Just think how nice it will be for you in 30 or 40 years to look at it and say, "There's Jennifer and she's a doctor now", "And that's Mike and he's a lawyer", when a voice from the back of the class chipped in, "And that's teacher, and he's dead". Jesus is more than a dead, historical figure, a single intervention by God at one point in history to reveal Himself. Christian believers have discovered He is alive today, and wishes to teach us today.

So the issue is, am I willing to be taught by Jesus? There is an Arab proverb which goes something like this: ‘He who knows, and knows that he knows, is a wise man—follow him. He who knows, and knows not that he knows, is deceived—enlighten him. He who knows not, and knows not that he knows not, is a fool—shun him. He who knows not, and knows that he knows not, is humble—teach him’. (And, if you couldn’t make head or tail of that, Confucius said much the same: “Shall I teach you the meaning of knowledge? When you know a thing to recognise that you know it, and when you do not, to know that you do not—that is knowledge”). Ok—let’s try plain English: only the teachable can be taught. We must know that we need teaching. Do we?

Is Jesus a teacher for us day-by-day? Old and young alike, mature Christian, new Christian, not yet a Christian: Are we prepared to be taught by Jesus? If so, when did He last teach you something? Will you let Him teach you something today, even from these verses?

## **2) Jesus the unexpected** (vv 2-3)

*When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”* (vv 2-3).

John the Baptist had been imprisoned by Herod the Tetrarch for his uncompromising condemnation of Herod’s adulterous behaviour. It sounds as though he was a little uncertain about Jesus at this point. The One to Whom he had pointed, the One Who he said would come in blessing and judgement (as we heard in our first reading from Matthew 3), had brought healing to many, but, it would seem, judgement to none—not even to those who had immorally and unlawfully imprisoned John. There appeared to John the Baptist in his prison cell to be no evidence that men were being subjected to a Messianic fire of judgement, no sign of the mighty being put down from their seats, nor the proud scattered in the imagination of their hearts. As John heard about the ministry of Jesus, it did not fit his expectations.

Now, if John the Baptist, Jesus’ cousin, steeped in the teaching of the Old Testament, could have wrong expectations about Jesus, how much more easily may you and I? How quick we are to decide what He is like, or what we want Him to be like, and how eager we are to make Him fit our own

picture of Him!

Notice how wisely John acted: when he was aware of the mismatch between his expectation and the realities of Jesus’ ministry, he sent his disciples straight to Jesus, so Jesus could correct him... so he could be taught by Jesus: *When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?”* (vv 2-3). And you and I can come to Jesus every day in His word with the same sort of request—“Lord, help us to mould our expectations to your reality, and not try to mould you to our expectations”. Do we pray that?

## **3) Jesus the Predicted**

Jesus the predicted, because Jesus’ reply to John was couched in terms of Old Testament prophesy: Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor (vv 4-5). Verse 5 is full of echoes from the book of Isaiah. For example, Isaiah 35: 4-6: *your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you. Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.* Or Isaiah 61:1-2: *The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn,* and you will have noticed that there is reference to judgement in both quotations: *your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.” Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped* (Isaiah 35:4-5).

Jesus was saying to John, “These are the signs of the coming of the Messiah; and that means judgement is coming too”. The axe is laid to the root of the trees. But it may not yet be fully visible, nor may it look quite as we expect it to: *The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor* (v 5). All around us in human society we see

disintegration and decay—physically, as healthy young people full of life become sickly old people close to death; morally, as human beings exploit and compete with one another. But then Jesus reverses that, as restoration and integration and new life take the place of corruption and death, so, the citadel of evil is being attacked at its very foundations. And when foundations begin to crack, you can be sure the structure will not last. When that scaffolding collapsed last week, in that awful accident, you can be sure it started at the bottom. God in Jesus has begun to dismantle the kingdom of evil from the bottom up, as the poor have good news preached to them: ***“The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me”*** (vv 5-6).

#### **4) Jesus predicted but unpredictable** (v 6)

***“Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me”*** (v 6)...get upset by Me”. Oh, and we do, don’t we? Perhaps we get upset when Jesus does not give us what we want. There is an electrifying article in the current edition of *Evangelicals Now* by John Piper, “Ten Ways Not to Waste Your Cancer”. Would you be upset with God if you found you, or someone you love dearly, had cancer? Read the article. I think you will find it helpful. It may change your thinking.

It is never easy to have our preconceptions overturned. George Bernard Shaw once said, “Some people say they’re thinking when they are only rearranging their prejudices”. We are so fond of our prejudices. We don’t like having the tables turned on us. A little girl once noticed some white hairs on her mum’s head, and so she said, “Mummy, why are some of your hairs going white?” The mother couldn’t resist the opportunity and she said, “Well love, every time you do something wrong and make me unhappy, one of my hairs turns white”. There was a thoughtful pause, before her little daughter responded, “Then why are all granny’s hairs white?” We don’t like having the tables turned on us. We don’t like discovering that God does not exist for our convenience, but that we exist for His glory.

And blessed is the person who, when he or she discovers that, does not take offence, does not fall away. God will do things in His own way for His own purposes. And the religious among us find it hard when God does not fit with our religious ideas

of how He should act. The less religious find it hard to cope with the fact that God lays claim to all our lives—and that if we will not let Him rule over us, than we will face His judgement.

But if we will let the Teacher teach us, let the Creator control us, let the king rule us, let the Saviour save us, then we will be blessed indeed. Let God be God. Let Jesus be Your God.

*(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)*