



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
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10p

Matthew chapter 11:16-24

There's no pleasing some People

Introduction: What does it take to get some people to change their minds?

For the last two weeks we have been looking at this chapter in Matthew's gospel and we have found that it raises the issue of 'What does it take to get some people to change their minds?'

Once upon a time there was a man who thought he was dead. His concerned wife and friends sent him to the friendly neighbourhood psychiatrist. The psychiatrist determined to cure him by convincing him of one fact that contradicted his belief that he was dead.

He decided to use the simple truth that dead men do not bleed. He put his patient to work reading medical texts, observing autopsies, etc. After weeks of effort, the patient finally said, 'All right, all right! You've convinced me. Dead men do not bleed.' Whereupon the psychiatrist stuck him in the arm with a needle, and the blood flowed. The man looked down with a contorted, ashen face, and cried: 'Good Grief! Dead man bleed after all!' Sometimes, a decision to believe something overrules all the evidence.

Now, that parable concerns a man who was ill, but there are many with no physical or mental illness at all, who are equally unwilling to change their minds over matters of belief.

1) The Childishly Wilful (vv16-19)

Let's consider first the childishly wilful people, described by Jesus in verses 16-19: *To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not*

mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 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."' But wisdom is proved right by her actions.

Until I looked more closely at this little parable of the children's game, I had always assumed it was referring to God as playing the flute, or singing the dirge, and it was the people who were refusing to respond appropriately. But, if you notice, it is actually this generation who are calling the tune: *To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge and you did not mourn'* (vv 16-17). In other words, when God sent John the Baptist, the people played Disco Music, but John would not dance along with them. So they rejected him: *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'* (v 18). But when Jesus came, they played a Requiem Mass, and Jesus would not be appropriately solemn; and so they rejected Him: *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"'* (19a,b).

This is not actually about the different styles of John the Baptist and of Jesus. It is about who calls the tune, who is in control, that childish wilfulness which insists on its own way, like the small boy who insisted on standing on the back seat of the family car, until his dad had to stop the car and come round and force him into the child seat and the seatbelt. A few moments after they had resumed their journey, a little voice from the back seat announced, "Outside I may be sitting down, but inside I'm still standing up".

It was a battle of wills: Who would call the tune? Does God have the right to take the initiative in relating to His creatures? Should He not just be available for us, at our beck and call, conveniently accessible when we want Him, and discreetly absent when we don't? Would that not be ideal—an idle idol (Nat Scis, Mathmos, you'll need to think about the spelling to make sense of that little apophthegm)?

But God is not an idle idol. He is the initiative-taking God, the proactive God, who does not dance to our tunes. 'He who pays the piper calls the tune', we say. And God paid the price of our salvation, so He does it His way. He is a 'Frank Sinatra' type of God if you like. He is the One who can sing, "I did it My Way!" or "I do it My way!" This universe does not actually exist to get my will done or yours; it exists to express the will of the God, who made it.

Is there something going on in your life or mine at the moment where just that battle rages? Where I am trying to get God to dance to my tune? Or will I dance to His? Is there some circumstance we just can't accept at the moment? Some relationship we refuse to work at, as we should? Some challenge we will not face? Remember—He does it His way.

But notice that way is a big enough way to encompass all human tastes: *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 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."* *But wisdom is proved right by her actions* (vv 18-19). These were people determined to find any way to evade the challenge of John and of Jesus. Some people will do anything to avoid a decision: when the labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson was wavering over Britain first joining the European Economic Community, as it was called in those days, some wag wrote:

Humpty Dumpty sat on the fence,
Until it ceased to make any sense.
Then, when he heard Destiny's call,
Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall.

And how often we encounter that sort of evasion when it comes to Christianity. People will find any excuse for moving from sitting on the fence to sitting on the wall. How often do we hear caricatures—they're just "happy clappy", "bible Bashers", "hot prot", "An insignificant minority of

old ladies...of both sexes"—as people focus on musical styles or architecture or degrees of formality or personality types, in order to avoid facing the claims of Jesus Christ... as if those other things matter! In fact, the Christian faith encompasses a huge range of emotional, and artistic and cultural expressions, just so honest men and women cannot dismiss it because it is too earnest or too emotional, too contemporary or too traditional, for them.

The fierce asceticism of John the Baptist and the relaxed sociability of Jesus Christ speak of a breadth in the will and purpose of God for the human race. In the gospel, there is bad news calling for solemn repentance and good news calling for emotional rejoicing—the gospel comprehends both. But the human race wriggles and squirms to avoid God's salvation: *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' 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."* *But wisdom is proved right by her actions* (vv 18-19).

But wisdom is proved right by her actions. In other words, God's work is self-authenticating. The ministries of John the Baptist and of Jesus did not need vindication. They were different in style (because they came at different stages in God's plan) but they were patently the work of God. And those who rejected them were like that party of school children visiting the National Gallery, whose foolish and scathing criticisms of some Grand Master paintings eventually provoked a gallery attendant into saying, "Excuse me, but these pictures before you are not on trial. They are some of the greatest art in history, and they have stood the test of centuries. It is not the pictures that are on trial here. It is the spectators".

It was not John the Baptist and Jesus Christ who were on trial. It was those to whom they preached, and before whom they had lived their lives: *"But wisdom is proved right by her actions"* (v 19c). The spectators were passing judgement on themselves.

2) The Day of Judgement (vv 20-24)

Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were

performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you” (vv 20-24).

One reason why we men and women want to retain the initiative in deciding how we are to relate to God is because we do not like the idea of judgement. Surely it does not fit with a Jesus, Who also said (at the end of this chapter), *Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest...for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your soul* (vv 28, 29).

a) But Jesus was also quite insistent on the certainty of the day of Judgement. In fact, it is the gentle Jesus in the gospels who has far more to say about Hell and Judgement, than the powerful Paul in his letters. Jesus may not have executed judgment in the way John the Baptist expected. But He certainly predicted it. And the only Jesus of whom the New Testament records tell is a Jesus who constantly warned of coming judgement: *But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you...But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you* (vv 22,24).

Now, that warning came in a particular context. Jesus did not begin His ministry in Korazin and Bethsaida with the words of verse 21: *Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.* That’s not how he started: No—what had Jesus done in Koazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum long before He pronounced judgement on them? *Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had been performed, because they did not repent* (v 20). In fact, please look back to verse 5: *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.* He had proved His identity as God’s Son and preached the good news. It is in that context that He pronounced judgement: *Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles*

that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you (vv 21-24).

b) Here we see the grounds for judgement. Tyre, Sidon and Sodom were Old Testament bywords for paganism and immorality. But there is no word here about the profanity or the immorality of Korazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. In fact, there is nothing here about their moral character at all. No, it is their refusal to respond appropriately to the presence, activity and teaching of Jesus that causes such sharp condemnation. God in person had walked their streets: They had not persecuted Him; they had not opposed Him; they had not even contradicted Him; but they had not repented. And so their fate would be worse than that of the moral plague spots of the ancient world.

Jesus (and how we respond to him) is the ground of judgement. Do you know that nightmare of having revised for the wrong exam? It would be awful, would it not, at exam time to think you were going into an exam on Renaissance Literature and to find yourself facing a paper on Quantum Mechanics? When we front up to God, there will only be one question—What did we do with Jesus?

In Jesus we human beings encounter goodness in its ultimate form. There is no one better than Him. I remember the aching intensity with which I first discovered that. I had been looking all my life for the good, for the best; and, when I looked into the face of Jesus, I found it. I found Him. And when we do that, we have to change—our thinking, and our lives—we have to repent. If we do not, we are rejecting the Good, the ultimate Good, and committing ourselves to something less good, to something bad in comparison, which will come under judgement.

The judgement is designed to drive us into the arms of Jesus. Think of the farmer’s wife who finds a mouse in the farmhouse kitchen and seizes a broom to deal with it. The mouse does not waste time looking at the broom. He is looking only for his hole that he may escape. We humans are not to

get obsessed with judgement. We are to look for the way to escape, the place of safety; we are to let it drive us into the arms of Christ. There is no other place of safety on the day of judgement. Are we ready?

I hope that speaks clearly to any here today who have not yet turned to Christ. I don't think you have ever found anything or anyone better than Him; and you will deserve judgement if you knowingly settle for something less than the best. Ask yourself: what more has God got to do to get me to change my mind about Jesus?

But to those here who have already turned to Christ and have a knowledge of Him, we too must heed the warning in these verses of the very great danger of a familiarity with Jesus which does not lead to repentance—a turning away from evil wherever we find it in our hearts, minds, lives or world. Ask: what more has God got to do to get me to change my life? Perhaps a Gift Day is a good occasion to ask ourselves that question: what more has God got to do to get me to change my lifestyle?

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