

10am HC Sunday 14th December 2025

Isaiah 35:1-10, James 5:7-10, Matt 11:2-11 – When faith falters, remember why you first believed in Jesus

For more than 25 years Johannes Kepler wrestled with the question of how to explain the motion of the planets. At that time, at the beginning of the 17th century, early models for the motion of the planets had been based either on solid regular shapes, or on simple ratios for how long it would take for them to complete their orbits (giving rise to the term “the harmony of the spheres”), or on the idea of circles on circles, because the circle was viewed as the ideal shape. However, none of these fitted the astronomical observations.

At one point, Kepler had suggested that planets moved in ellipses. But he dismissed his own suggestion, saying “it could not be the correct answer”. Only later, when other models failed to work, was he forced to conclude that the planets did in fact move in elliptical orbits, with the sun at one focus. This is now universally referred to as Kepler’s first law of planetary motion.

Kepler’s idea that the planets moved in ellipses was correct, but it took him a long time to appreciate this.

John the Baptist, and everybody else who knew the Jewish scriptures, thought they knew exactly why the Messiah had to come and what he would do. But John still struggled to match what he was seeing with what he had expected to see and he began to doubt whether he had been correct.

Last week, in our Gospel reading, we heard how John had been in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming that ***one who is more powerful than I is coming after me [and] I am not worthy to carry his sandals.***

John the Baptist was Jesus’ cousin, slightly older than Jesus by just a few months, and John would have grown up knowing all the stories surrounding Jesus’ birth. It was John’s certainty that Jesus was the Messiah that had made Jesus’ insistence that John must baptise Jesus so baffling to John.

So what made John lose his confidence that Jesus really was the Messiah? And how can thinking about John’s loss of confidence in Jesus help us to understand what we need to do, when we start to lose our own confidence in Jesus?

Let’s look at our Gospel passage again.

We’re not told what prompted John to ***[send] word by his disciples [saying to Jesus] “are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?”***

But one thing that we can learn from Jesus' response to John the Baptist's question is that it is always ok to ask God why our reality doesn't seem to correspond with what God's word has promised us.

And the message that Jesus gives John's disciples to take back to John can tell us something about what we ourselves can do when we start to doubt whether Jesus is who he claims to be.

First, a little bit of background will help us to understand what might have prompted John's doubts about Jesus. John is in prison, for speaking out and correctly telling King Herod **"it is not lawful for you to have [your brother Philip's ex-wife]"**? Isaiah in chapter 61:1 had said the Messiah would come **to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners?** So was John frustrated that Jesus was doing nothing to bring to justice the people, like Herod, who abused their power, or to rescue John and others who had been wrongly imprisoned?

We all know that it isn't always easy to live as a Christian. But when trying to live a faithful life seems to bring only pain and difficulty, what should we do? We heard earlier how James, in his letter, warns believers they **must be patient, strengthen [their] hearts, and look to the prophets ... as an example of suffering and patience**. But sometimes that seems very hard to do, and like John, we can find ourselves doubting whether we've got it right. Sometimes our expectations of what life should be like, as a follower of Jesus, seem not to match the hard reality.

Perhaps John was getting impatient for Jesus to take action: to get rid of the Roman rulers and bring in the kingdom of God. Or perhaps John was looking for Jesus to bring judgment to people who'd lost their moral compass.

As we heard in our Gospel reading last Sunday, John had been in the wilderness warning of **"the one who is coming after me ... [who] will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire; [whose] winnowing fork is in his hand and [who] will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary [and] the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."**

If that was the kind of Messiah John was hoping for, Jesus certainly didn't look like that sort of Messiah. Jesus was still pottering around Galilee and Judea, healing everybody who came to him. Jesus didn't look like somebody who'd come to restore the kingdom of God and the right way of doing things; Jesus was surprisingly lax towards people who were feckless about fasting, and he was happy to eat with tax collectors and sinners. It was only at the end of his ministry that Jesus would tell people parables warning about the coming judgement.

But with Jesus' message to John's disciples, Jesus is confirming that he is the Messiah, because the things that Jesus says he is doing are the things Isaiah had promised the Messiah would do. They are a foretaste of what the King will do when he returns to claim his kingdom, as ***the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.***

John doubted Jesus because Jesus wasn't acting in the way that John expected the Messiah to act.

We should ask ourselves: do we doubt Jesus because his teaching doesn't meet our expectations? Do we find Jesus' teaching on temptation, for instance, or about money, too hard to live up to?

Or perhaps the problem is that we think Jesus is too quick to be merciful. We struggle to accept Jesus' teaching because it doesn't square with our own sense of morality and of what people do and don't deserve.

So when we look at all the unjust and evil deeds that spoil our world and spread despair and misery, we find ourselves thinking that Jesus' message of reconciliation and forgiveness, is just too soft.

Jesus says ***blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me***; in the Greek it says blessed is anybody who is not ***scandalised*** by Jesus. So *if* we can overcome our hostility to Jesus' teachings, even if at first we find them challenging or off-putting or even offensive, we will find blessing in them.

When John began to doubt that Jesus was the Messiah, Jesus reassured John by showing John the connections between what John knew about the Messiah, and what John knew about Jesus.

Johannes Kepler eventually realised that what he was observing in the planets' movements was indeed consistent with what he had originally believed about the planets' orbits, but had struggled for so long to think could actually be true.

It was Kepler's belief that God had created the cosmos in an orderly fashion that made him keep on trying to work out the laws that govern the natural world. Kepler himself wrote: *"Those laws [of nature] are within the grasp of the human mind; God wanted us to recognize them by creating us after his own image so that we could share in his own thoughts."*

And likewise, when our faith in Jesus falters, we need to remember what made us first believe in Jesus. Our faith might be faint, but it can flicker and come back to life if we remember what we've seen and heard about Jesus. That might be what we've read for

ourselves, in the Bible, or what we've experienced in our own lives, or have witnessed in the lives of others.

When we hear of answered prayer, we remember our own prayers and how God has answered them. Our communion service helps us remember that Jesus died for us. Singing Christmas carols helps us remember that it was because of the Father's love for us that Jesus came to us as a baby.

Just as Jesus made connections for John between what he knew about the Messiah and what he was seeing Jesus do, we can make the connections between what we know about God, and what we have seen God do.

When your faith in Jesus begins to falter, remember why you first believed in Jesus.

And in the words of Isaiah, we can ***say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God."***