

Believing in the dark: The Word holds onto us

¹⁸ The disciples of John reported all these things to him. And John, ¹⁹ calling two of his disciples to him, sent them to the Lord, saying, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?” ²⁰ And when the men had come to him, they said, “John the Baptist has sent us to you, saying, ‘Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?’”

²¹ In that hour he healed many people of diseases and plagues and evil spirits, and on many who were blind he bestowed sight. ²² And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them. ²³ And blessed is the one who is not offended by me.”

²⁴ When John’s messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ²⁵ What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who are dressed in splendid clothing and live in luxury are in kings’ courts. ²⁶ What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ²⁷ This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face,
who will prepare your way before you.”

²⁸ I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.” ²⁹ (When all the people heard this, and the tax collectors too, they declared God just, having been baptized with the baptism of John, ³⁰ but the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected the purpose of God for themselves, not having been baptized by him.)

³¹ “To what then shall I compare the people of this generation, and what are they like? ³² They are like children sitting in the marketplace and calling to one another,

“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we sang a dirge, and you did not weep.”

³³ For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He has a demon.’ ³⁴ The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ ³⁵ Yet wisdom is justified by all her children.” (Luke 7:18-35 ESV)

I wonder how many people in northern Norway on Wednesday morning wondered whether the end of the world had come when the white cone and green spiral [show picture] was seen high in the sky? Seen and recorded by hundreds of people over many miles and featured on news services around the world with the most accepted explanation a malfunctioning orbital Russian rocket (though, I think, officially still denied) this rather dramatic way to wake up will have engendered numerous responses – curiosity, excitement, fear, dread. The people in Norway who see it have no idea whether people in Sweden or England or the USA or Australia are seeing it. At the moment of sight you have a moment to decide what is going on and a constellation of ideas will be assessed and reassessed – even if ‘not knowing’ or ‘unknown’ is the explanation. At any moment our views on reality and our beliefs can be challenge and we will need to make check and take stock, sometimes it’s a split second and at other times it might take years.

A person’s praying and the thought flits into their mind ‘this is rubbish – there is no God’ and the immediate reaction? Stop? Keep going? Worry about the thought and where it came from? Ignore it?

One looks at the stars, considers a news item, learns of a new scientific discovery or there is no ‘trigger’ and all of a sudden you’re thinking ‘we’re all alone’ or some other thought that flies in the face of your faith and it might not be a crisis of faith but it’s certainly a question of faith. What then? Stop and resolve? Put it on the back burner for the next devotion time? Forget about it?

A loved one dies or a prayer is specifically not answered as we’d wanted and one’s faith is now in the dock – will it survive or be found wanting? How will the verdict be reached?

John the Baptist’s entire life was geared to be a special messenger as the angel Gabriel told his father, Zechariah, “... he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:16,17). We know John was clear and to the point, that many came for his baptism of repentance and the way was made ready for the Lord. John was controversial – then so was Elijah – and people were for and against him. When Jesus came to be

baptised by him Luke doesn't record the indication that John's uncomfortable and knows or senses enough that Jesus should be doing the baptising. Once Jesus is on the scene, John doesn't vanish, he still keeps pointing to Jesus – the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29) – and he knows his role when he says “He must increase but I must decrease” (John 3:30). He winds up in prison from which he won't leave alive – hardly a place for a prophet's retirement – and we can imagine the thoughts in the cells, the prayers unanswered, the work he still thought he'd do and the questions come and so his disciples ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”.

Now this question only makes sense if John is going to trust what Jesus says! In other words even if Jesus says ‘No, I'm not’ – perhaps he's another messenger to prepare the way – why can't God send two? – or he might be a fraud – John is really going to take Jesus' words seriously for starters. Jesus points to his deeds which are described in a way that makes links with the prophet Isaiah. He gives John his answer and points him an additional reference – one John would have known well – the Old Testament (in this case Isaiah but it wouldn't take much to make links with other passages) and in doing so, Jesus did what he told people to do before and after his crucifixion – search the Scriptures, the Law, Prophets and Psalms for they have life – and they have life only because they point to Jesus – he fulfils them (John 5:39; Luke 24:44).

I expect to see John the Baptist in heaven and that his questions – are they doubts? I suppose so – didn't derail his faith and send him into darkness. What is intriguing is that in this scene we have John in his prison with his questions and Jesus describing John to the crowds in terms of greatness because he did his tasks in preparing the way – in baptising – and in becoming a lightning rod for those for and against him.

Jesus then goes on to comment to the crowds about themselves – this present generation – and to be honest – its still the same today. People can't read spiritual signs – we don't know what to look for – and we put our own agendas and ideas on top of things and claim wisdom and insight. So John was an ascetic – didn't indulge or imbibe and his critics say he's demon possessed. So that's obviously not ‘spiritual’! The Son of Man instead comes eating and drinking and the people call him a glutton, a drunkard, and a friend of sinners! So that's not ‘spiritual’ either! People don't see what God is doing, don't recognise him when he is doing things, and want to make God and his messengers – whoever they are – in their own image!

It's the same today. People's views of clergy – what's appropriate behaviour and spirituality – are so often culturally based. Similarly in determining God's existence, presence, and activity, I find it is usually based on people's experiences – their little special moments – maybe answers to prayer – or their imagined views of Jesus. This means that the questions, doubts, niggles, struggles – which are all experiences! – become just another experience to process.

What Jesus does for John, what he even does for the crowds, is to point them away from themselves and to him. And of course, he looks just a man to them – sure a superman type guy or a demon depending on your point of view – and yes, we don't see him at all with our eyes today – but he does the same thing for us. His Word – the Old Testament and the New Testament – proclaim him, preach him, bring him to us – and by the power of the Spirit he engages our questions and helps us work out answers. His Word guides us to see water and bread and wine not just on the surface so to speak but as powerful spiritual channels or means by which he comes to us to forgive, heal, bless, comfort, and also to challenge and confront. My point remains that left to ourselves we would miss Jesus and go chasing after the latest religious fad or drown in our questions or despair. Our faith is not home grown – of ourselves – though like our physical lives we can do things to strengthen or weaken it – but our faith is created by God's Word and engages all aspects of our lives – not just the Sunday hour or 75 minutes.

Whether the next celestial event is another rocket, aliens turning up, Jesus' return or something else or if the day is just another ‘normal’ one – whatever that means – people of faith are constantly reassessing that faith – often I suspect its pretty well unconsciously as the world keeps its meaning for us – we also call this ‘living the faith’ – and its foundation, if it is the Christian faith, remains Jesus – himself personally – not his rules – but him personally and his Word – and that Word is our sure foundation that holds us no matter what.