

**Matthew 11:2-6**

**ADVENT EXPECTATIONS**

The higher the level of expectation, the greater the potential for disappointment. Have you ever experienced the truth of those words before? Perhaps there was an event, or a holiday, or a movie or TV series, which you had really been looking forward to and expected great things from, but then, when it all happened, it wasn't what you expected it to be and you were left feeling disappointed. Many times our expectations are met, many times things are even better than we expected, but at others how we had set in our head that things were going to be like ended up being very different, which can quickly frustrate us. This can also happen with people. We regularly see when a new leader is appointed or elected, or a new sporting star joins your team, that after the honeymoon period is over they begin to attract criticism because they aren't doing the things people expected them to do in the way they expected them to do them. Perhaps you yourself have been told, or made to feel, that the expectations others had of you weren't fulfilled.

We need to ask ourselves though, in those situations; is our disappointment justified, or is it because our expectations were unrealistic? This especially applies when we are disappointed in other people. Do we get frustrated because what they did, and how they did it, was ineffective? Or is it because what was done wasn't done the way we expected it to be, with the results we expected to see? If we can accept that people don't, and won't, always live up to our expectations, are we able to better understand, appreciate, and receive what they do offer to us?

“Are you the one we should be looking for? Or must we wait for someone else?” (v. 3). They certainly sound like the words of someone whose expectations have been let down, don't they? When John the Baptist is in prison, and there because he was fulfilling his role of making the road ready for Jesus' coming, that is the message he sends some of his followers to ask Jesus. We know that John and Jesus knew each other, probably very well. They met literally before they were born, when Mary, newly pregnant, went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was pregnant with John. We're even told that the unborn baby John jumped for joy when the mother of His Saviour came to visit. With the relationship which obviously existed between Mary and Elizabeth,

it's very likely Jesus and John spent time together at family gatherings as they were growing up. And, we know that John Baptised Jesus, proclaiming Him as the 'Lamb of God', and saying, 'I'm not even worthy to tie your sandals!'. High expectations!

But now, languishing in prison, it seems John is beginning to have some doubts; "Are you the one we should be looking for? Or must we wait for someone else?" Is it because Jesus isn't doing things the way John thinks He should be? Does John, like many of his time, expect the Messiah to come and overthrow their Roman conquerors and give the land of Israel back to their people? Or, like some have suggested, is John the Baptist still firmly on Team Jesus, and his question is just to get his followers and the crowds to start to see who Jesus really is? "Are you the one we should be looking for? Or must we wait for someone else?" How do you hear those words being said: in frustration, disappointment? Or in hope that everyone will see that God's love has come into the world through this Saviour?

Do you ever ask that question of God, if not exactly in those words, in a similar way? We see the innocent suffering in our world; people undergoing hardship simply because of the situation they were born into. We see people dying through no fault of their own, either because of circumstances which are out of their control, or sometimes even because of the actions of others who appear to get away with it. In our own lives, we can experience grief, sadness because of hardships we go through, disappointment with how some parts of our lives have turned out, the pain of relationships which aren't what we want them to be. The sadness and worry over our loved ones. We believe that God loves us, that He is over everything, but why do these things happen to us, especially when we are doing our best to follow Him? We can ask, 'why me, Lord?' 'I prayed about this, and this isn't the way I wanted it to turn out?' 'I believe in you, and I'm doing my best to trust you, but at the moment that is getting pretty hard to do'. Like John, and plenty of others since and still today, we can struggle with how God's love comes to us in Jesus, because it's not always how we think it should.

It seems that many people, when they are asked why they don't believe in God, will answer, 'if God is real, and almighty, then why does so much bad stuff happen?' And, as far as they are concerned, that's the end of the discussion, because God hasn't lived up to their expectations of just jumping in and fixing things for everyone. And, let's be honest, have you ever had those same thoughts, those same struggles, those same doubts? And if you have, is that ok, or does it show a lack of faith in God and His love for us?

Even when it comes to God, is it ok sometimes to have doubts, to sometimes feel that our expectations haven't been met?

Recently I read a book by Craig Goeschel entitled, *The Benefit of Doubt* (the title kind of gives away where this is going). He made a couple of great points in this book which I think tie in well with what we are being taught in our reading. The first point is that 'doubt is not a weakness, but an opportunity to deepen faith'. Doubts, even struggles, open up in us the desire to go into things a bit further, to leave our preconceived expectations aside, and to look into and find out who God really is to us, how God works in our world, and what it means to us that Jesus came to be our Saviour. In doing this, Goeschel says, doubt can be a bridge to stronger faith, rather than a barrier. Don't see your doubts, your questions, even your struggles, as being a sign of weak or failing faith, use them as an opportunity God has given you to go deeper into your faith, to come to really know God, who He is to you, how He is at work in your life and in the world. This reminds me of the movie *Conclave*, based on the book by Robert Harris, which I have talked about before. It's a fictional story about the election of a new pope, and my favourite quote in there is when the Cardinal in charge of the election delivers a sermon to all the other cardinals gathered together, and he says, "Our faith is a living thing precisely because it walks hand in hand with doubt. If there was only certainty, and if there was no doubt, there would be no mystery, and therefore no need for faith." And then he goes on to say, "I pray for a pope who doubts". I have doubts, regularly. Not so much about if God exists but about what He is doing in my life and in the wider world. I know how I expect God to do things, but He quite often takes them in a different direction. Like in any other relationship when my expectations in someone are not fulfilled, do I walk away and create distance, or do I choose to go deeper, look at myself, and open my eyes to see that what I am offered is far greater than I had expected?

It is so easy to write God off because He doesn't do things in the way we expect Him to. Again, suffering in the world is a big reason why many people find it hard to have faith, and I understand that. Sadly, I have seen people go away from their faith because of what has happened in their lives, and what they have been through I know would test my faith also. Again, we can expect God to just fix it all and work it all out for us, but the problem of sin in the world, and the fact that God gave us this thing called Free Will which means He can't just make us do what He wants us to do, make that not possible. God knew that quick fixes and interventions weren't the most effective way to go, despite the fact this is what many of us expect.

So, what did God do? This we remember both in this time of Advent, and for the months to come as we remember what Jesus did in coming into our world. In the face of our doubts, our struggles, even our suffering, God came into our world as one of us to go through all of these with us; to help us with them and to lead us through them. In His birth in a manger, we see God coming down as low as He can. In this baby, in this manger, we see God's love for us. And even more so, in a way that mightn't make sense, and certainly wasn't what anyone expected, the Messiah, the Son of God who is God Himself, gave up His life on the cross, in shame and suffering, so that we could all be forgiven and have our relationship with God restored. We can know this, we can receive this, when we put aside all our expectations and look to what God promises us through this Advent season.

“Are you the one we should be looking for? Or must we wait for someone else?” Faith does at times involve doubt, sometimes it brings with it struggles, but this can open us up to receiving a deeper knowledge and understanding of God's love at work in our lives. It might sound strange to say we can have unrealistic expectations of God, because God can do anything, but we can let our expectations stop us from receiving all God wants to give to us, and seeing how He is at work in the world and in our lives. Instead, lower your eyes to the manger, where we see God in love come down to us. Raise your eyes to the cross, where we see God in love doing all; He can to save us and all people. Know that by faith in God's love for us in Jesus we do and will receive more than we can ever expect. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- Can you think of a time when your expectations in an event, movie, or even a person, weren't fulfilled? Is that because they really weren't 'up to standard', or because what you had expected prevented you from seeing and appreciating what they were really like?
- Are there times when you have doubts or struggles in your faith? If so, reflect on them, or share them with others if you feel you can. Do these struggles and doubts ever threaten your faith, or do they give you opportunity to go deeper in your relationship with God? If these are these things which are really affecting your faith, pray about them and perhaps talk to someone you trust.
- Think about all the ways Jesus didn't follow the expectations of people, back then and still today. But then, think about how in this, as in all things, the way God does things is always better than we can either plan or expect. How do you see God exceeding our expectations in how He shows His love for people and the world?

Pray: Thank God that He works and acts in a way which gives us far more than we can ever expect. Ask God to help us to allow our struggles and doubts to move us into a closer relationship with Him.

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