

**Sermon:** Has anyone noticed our churches are closed?

**Reading:** Matthew 11:1- 30

### **Introduction:**

Being a Christian in an increasingly secular nation is a growing challenge. It seems more and more people in the UK have chosen to dismiss God as irrelevant to their lives, without really thinking too deeply about it for themselves. They dismiss God, basing their rationale on the flimsiest of reasons and excuses. When engaging with family, friend or stranger in conversations relating to matters of faith, it's not long before the objections soon surface. This is nothing new of course. This has always been the way of the world, when evangelists set out to speak the word of God.

A visiting evangelist once challenged the congregation I belonged to with a question, 'If your church closed tomorrow, would anyone notice, would the world around you be noticeably different?' The question posed by the evangelist is no longer hypothetical or theoretical for each church in the UK can now discover for themselves the true answer!!

'Has anyone noticed we are not there? Has our absence been felt?' I'm not referring to those who attend weekly services or coffee mornings or even those who hire rooms within our church buildings. I'm speaking about the voice of the church, has it been noticeably quiet? Has anyone noticed the prophetic message the church is called to speak is missing? Are our moral values and scriptural holiness longed for again? Has our message of Jesus left a spiritual void and created a hunger in the lives of those around us? Has anyone noticed our absence? These are important to consider because they form part of our witness as Christians in our communities.

In our reading today, Matthew records two very different styles of ministry which impact the communities around them, although styles differ both preach the same message. Does today's passage have anything to teach the church about maintaining our presence to be the witness for Jesus in a secular age?

### **Context**

Chapter 11 of Matthew's Gospel we discover John the Baptist has been arrested and thrown into prison, for preaching against the adulterous relationship Herod was having with his brother Phillip's wife! The only way to silence John was to lock him up.

John's followers are left bewildered thinking his ministry has failed and it's all over, they don't know what to do next. While in prison, John sets them a task, to seek out Jesus and ask him this question, 'Are you the one who is to come or should we expect someone else?'

From what we know of John, he was a fearless, uncompromising and fiery preacher who warned the people of Israel and Judea to repent and return to God, before the judgment which was to come. John was not afraid to confront and call out sin no matter where it was to be found, whether it was in the secret places of the human heart or within the great halls of kings' palaces. John would not compromise the word of God.

John's mission was to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. To get the people to return to God. When we read about John we do get a sense of urgency in his preaching. He knew time was short and time for John to prepare the way was running out.

When John's disciples found Jesus they told him of John's arrest and imprisonment and they ask him the question John had given them. Jesus affirms John's ministry with high praise saying, 'Of all men there is no one born who is greater than John'. Jesus tells them to look and see the answer to your question. 'The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached' (**Matt 11:5**). John was chosen to prepare the way for Jesus.

Andrew was one of John the Baptists disciples, who became a follower of Jesus and in doing so introduced his brother Simon (Peter) to Jesus. Andrew was a great introducer of people to Jesus, for it was Andrew introduced the boy with the packed lunch to Jesus at the feeding of the 5000. Introduce people to Jesus and you never know what is going to happen next!

Andrew was used to John's particular style of ministry, his austere lifestyle, the way he prayed, fasted, lived and preached. What I found interesting when reading this passage again was the challenging transition Andrew must have had from John's style of ministry to Jesus' ministry style. We pick this up in verse 18 when Jesus says,

"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'" (**Matt 11:18**). Andrew was to expect a very different style of ministry in following Jesus than he had seen before, but the message remained the same.

### **Jesus ministry**

When we reach verse 20 we discover Jesus spends time ministering in the three cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. These towns were the most blessed of all of the ancient cities in history. Never before had anyone witnessed anything like this. Jesus' teaching was unlike anything they had ever heard. The miracles unlike anything they had ever seen and His power unlike anything they had ever experienced. No illness, no disease was too much for Jesus, all were cured. Not only did the demons flee at his command but even the storms tossed seas and blustery winds obeyed him.

These three cities of Galilee had a high opinion of themselves and were complacent in their attitude to all of the blessings they had received. They thought they were all heading to heaven, they had a self righteous attitude! However they had neither the eyes to see nor heart of love for God. They refused to repent and have faith in Jesus. Because of their rejection and continued rebellion, Jesus pronounces a stark warning against these 3 cities and compares their state to be in a worse situation than any of other ancient cities destroyed for their wickedness under God's judgment.

Jesus contrasts Capernaum with the wicked city of Sodom, which was notorious for wickedness and depravity. God says the cry against Sodom has come before Him and He sets out to destroy Sodom for its sinfulness. Jesus' warning is sobering to Capernaum saying, 'Will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For 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 judgement than for you' (**Matthew 11:23**). It's a scary thought as the cities that received more light (light of the grace of God and the gospel of Jesus), such as Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum will therefore be judged much more harshly than that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Tyre and Sidon on judgement day.

The wife of the famous evangelist Billy Graham was reviewing a manuscript from a book he was writing. The chapter was on the sins of America. Shocked by what she was reading she remarked, 'If God doesn't bring judgment upon America, He'll have to go back and apologise to Sodom and Gomorrah. This is what Jesus is referring to when he uses Capernaum and Sodom as a comparison. This thought led me to consider the cities today in the UK! At what point will the cry against the UK, go out before the God, for the wickedness and rebellion of this nation, which has turned their backs on God and are living in open rebellion and blasphemy every day? As a nation, the UK has enjoyed much fruit from the Judeo-Christian heritage and the light that we have received has been bright. Will Jesus say the same about the UK in a comparison with Capernaum and Sodom? We may respond, of course not, which is probably how Capernaum responded!

Have we taken our call as Jesus followers too lightly? Have we been casual and luke warm in our commitment? Have we neglected biblical fellowship, meeting together for prayer and obeying the call to walk in faith?

Our churches were the first places to close up their buildings in the UK, as restrictions began to be implemented and it's likely the church building may well be the last to open once restrictions have eased! Is God speaking to us through this? Consider this passage, from Peter and ponder these words and ask ourselves, is God speaking to us, what is He saying? "For it is time for judgement to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who disobey the gospel of God?" (**1 Peter 4:17**).

If we answer we closed our churches to keep ourselves safe, then also consider this, not only have our churches been locked up the longest during the lockdown, but restrictions are also impacting on our favoured tradition of singing, which is prohibited for the foreseeable future! Many people are fearful of returning to church and the 70+ age group are discouraged by the government of returning. Is all this just a cautious coincidence or is God's hand in this situation, shaking and sifting His Church? This presents churches with a challenging question, 'How much do we love God? Can we only worship when we sing or do we love God with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength? Is God challenging and shaking His people, His house to see how deep our faith and commitment really goes? We have been given much light, have we treated God far too casually in our walk with Him. Is God calling us to repent and seek him in prayer? It's a serious question.

### **Rejected but not unnoticed!**

When reading this passage today, I found great encouragement in how Jesus responds to the rejection He faced when He called the people to repent and believe. Jesus doesn't become discouraged and downhearted, bitter cynical or vindictive, for these traits are never found in our Lord. What Jesus does is prays a prayer of thankfulness. Being thankful when your love is spurned, when grace is shunned, when teaching is ignored and preaching ridiculed, is amazing! Why does Jesus pray in thankfulness? Listen to what He prays, "I thank You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because You have hidden these things from the wise and prudent and have revealed them to babes" (**Matt 11:25-30**). We must not think Jesus is expressing delight in the judgment which will come upon these cities because of their rejection of Him. So why was Jesus praying a thanksgiving prayer?

The answer reveals the amazing grace of God. These cities were already lost to the ways of God. Their hearts were hard and their rebellion deep. God in his infinite mercy chose these wayward cities to base the ministry of Jesus. Think about how many opportunities the people of these cities were given? They witnessed the power of God and heard the call to repent in order to be saved and avoid the judgement and wrath to come.

On the day of the Lord, when the fearful day of judgment arrives, not one person will be able to say, we never knew! No one will be able to say, 'No one told us!' Every resident of these cities will have to admit to God's graciousness and mercy, in sending His own Son to warn them to flee from the wrath to come. They will grind their teeth knowing they chose to ignore Him and are now lost for an eternity. God could have destroyed these cities long ago, as He did with Sodom and Gomorrah, but instead, He sent His only Son, that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life. Now, however like the thief on the cross, they will declare themselves guilty, saying, 'We deserve our punishment'. The secular world hates the thought of there ever being a day of reckoning but no one on that day will ever be able to say God is unjust! Why? Because of the life of Jesus, His sacrificial death and glorious resurrection. Lets not forget He came to build His Church as an everlasting witness.

## **Come to me and rest**

Matthew ends this chapter with encouraging words from Jesus. For those who are feeling neglected, sad, weary and discouraged. Jesus says, 'Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls....'(Matt 11:28). The message of Jesus remains the same today as it did in the days of Capernaum. Just as it did when John the Baptist preached. The object of our faith is not to invite someone to come to our church, when it opens!! But like Andrew to introduce people to Jesus himself. This is why Jesus says, 'Come to Me'. He never says, come to church! Although that is a given once you give your life to Jesus, for Jesus came to build a Church.

Think about it, how hard is it to walk towards someone who extends a warm welcome and invitation to you? Someone who is offering you exactly what you need and cares so much for you, they would give even their own life to see you have what you most need! The invitation to come, requires no great climb, no challenging walk across hot coals, no marathon run, no begging crawl, the invitation is simply, 'Come to Me'. How easy is the invitation Jesus offers to the tired, weary, fearful and burdened? Simply to come and to find rest! It is only the stubbornness of our own hearts and pride that blinds us, making us stiff necked and fostering an attitude of self sufficiency which prevents us from coming and makes us sluggish, oh and not forgetting of course, the love of sin which we do not want to give up, which only deceives us.

What do we need to do to receive rest for our souls? Simply turn around (repent) and come to Jesus. We do not need to wait until restrictions are eased, and certainly not keeping the 2m distance! But come Jesus all you who are heavy laden and 'I will give you rest' says our Lord, who is still calling out to us. We can come, now, and Jesus will show us what He can do with our life, removing our sins and burdens. In exchange we can take up his yoke, for His burden is easy and His yoke is light.

Hell is filled with fools deceived by their own cleverness, self righteousness and pride, but the wise run to Christ and receive a heavens reward. They find He is a gracious and loving Saviour wanting none to perish and for us to be set free from the burdens and sin which binds. To receive the joy of His presence for He is no absent God. He will renew a right spirit within us and give us life.

## **Summary**

The secular world doesn't recognise the importance of the message we have to share. It never has! They beheaded John and rejected Jesus. Both had very different styles of ministry, so it's not the method of ministry which is right or wrong. The message however has got to be right! The prophet Isaiah tells us, 'So is my word that goes out from my mouth; It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it' (Isaiah 55:11). Never make the mistake of thinking, when we speak and share our faith, it just falls on deaf ears and is rejected and we have failed. The words we speak will fulfil the purpose for which God intends for them.

I want to return to the question of the evangelist challenged the church I belonged to, Has anyone noticed our absence? If our churches went back on Sunday would anyone notice we have returned? If no one has noticed our absence they probably won't notice our return. If we are not making our presence known, we remain absent. Is God shaking us up? Church and worship is more than singing in Sunday, we have a message to proclaim. John was a fiery trail blazer, loud and bold. Jesus was patient, courageous, unswerving uncompromising and gracious. These two ministries very different, yet both spoke the same message. Our church is a calling of God and what a message we have to give. Repent and return and be the presence, He is calling us to be. **Amen.**