

Luke 1:47-55

Among the arguments that Jesus was a woman, the most well known are:

a. he fed a crowd at a moment's notice when there was no food / b. even when he was dead, he had to get up because there was still more work to do. C. He kept trying to get his message across to a bunch of men who just didn't get it.

Well, as far as I can tell – Eric Cantona never didn't go to the bank on Tuesday! Once again, John the Baptist features in this week's readings – but this week, John the Baptist doesn't seem to have grasped the reality before him.

Of all the great things that Jesus did and showed and taught – above else, today's readings focus upon one incontrovertible biblical fact. That Jesus, failed. In the eyes of those who had prophesied about the coming Messiah – his mother, his cousin – whose highest hopes and deepest longings were so beautifully articulated in Scripture – Jesus ... failed.

Today's readings, when placed together, show something pretty difficult to misinterpret. On the one hand, you have Mary – celebrating all that the Messiah is supposed to do. On the other hand, you have John the Baptist, baffled about why Jesus is not doing what he's meant to be doing! He was one of the men who just didn't get it! And you can hardly blame him, given the expectations thrust onto a Messiah. Mary had articulated them as clearly as anyone!

And this seems to me, the point of the earliest chapters of Luke's Gospel. The very best that Judaism had to offer: Elizabeth and Zechariah were blameless before God, but even they – but they couldn't get their heads around what the archangel told them, when the birth of John the Baptist was foretold.

But Mary's prophecies were not fulfilled! Rulers remained on their thrones – Jesus had not torn them down. The hungry were still hungry! Jesus had not sent the rich away empty. The status quo was left entirely intact, and Jesus didn't seem to be interested in doing any of the jobs on the agenda of the wisest and godliest people of his generation. And if you were John the Baptist, and you were in prison for political subversion – wouldn't you be wondering what Jesus was up to? Was he really the one to come? Or should we go looking for someone who will satisfy our expectations more fully? --- If we were there, really – wouldn't we be among those men who just didn't get it!

Given that Luke only gives us a snapshot of what was happening, that he takes the godliest people and the worst enemies of Jesus, places them alongside the godliest people and Jesus' family and friends – and shows how both groups just didn't get what he was saying – Given that this is all we get in Luke, wouldn't you love to hear some of the conversations he must have had.

How many "wise" people would have pulled Jesus to one side and given him a bit of advice? And in all honesty, would you have been among them? "Come on, Jesus – if you want to bring justice, you won't be able to do it without getting rid of the Romans." The logic is almost unavoidable if you're living in first century Galilee. "Come on Jesus, if you want to bring Justice you could at least preach about rebellion against Rome. There'll be people to support you if you do..."

“Come on Jesus, open your eyes and have a look what’s happening under your nose: your own countrymen are starving and hungry. Why are you not out there caring for them?”

“Come on Jesus, if you really want to change the world – then instead of complaining about your own countrymen – you should be affirming them, getting them on side...”

“Come on Jesus, the real enemy is Rome, not your own people. Where is the revolution? Where is the great turning of the tide? If you’re the Messiah, when are you going to start doing something? Tell these stones to become bread...”

There must have been no end of people offering Jesus their well meaning advice. And I would love to hear how he dealt with them. All we have is a message from John the Baptist. And let’s just stop and think about this. Of all the people who really should have had a glimpse of what a Messiah should do, John the Baptist was the most likely. He did not fit in with any of the conventions of his day; he had attracted an enormous following; he was God’s appointed one to prepare the way for the Messiah – so he should have understood what a Messiah is to do. And, he is Jesus’ own kinsman.

So imagine, try to picture the face of Jesus when this message comes to him. Try to imagine Jesus – surrounded by a world that just didn’t get him! At the back of his mind, it must have been reassuring to know that at least God’s appointed herald would understand him! So try to picture the face of Jesus when this message comes to him: “Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect another?” John the Baptist, was amongst those countless other people who just didn’t get it!

And looking at the human Jesus – wouldn’t that be a devastating blow. I mean, throughout his ministry, there must have been times when Jesus – in his humanity – had moments of self-doubt. What would this do to him? Thankfully, Jesus was not some self-deluded, lazy, would-be religious leader floating around the ancient Near East, hopelessly misunderstood. Stuff was going on around Jesus, wherever he went!

I can remember my Dad saying something similar about Kate Adie! In the 1980s, Kate Adie was a BBC reporter who seemed to get assigned to every politically violent hotspot around the globe. And I can remember my Dad hearing the words, “Kate Adie reports live from...” And my dad shook his head – and said – “That woman - : have you noticed, there’s trouble wherever she goes!” That was Jesus, entirely. If you read the gospels, there is trouble wherever Jesus is – and he draws attention to it in his reply to John.

But his reply is worth considering for a moment... Jesus doesn’t descend into argument again. He doesn’t say – oh, John the Baptist has got it all wrong, just like the rest of you. He doesn’t say – Yes I am the Messiah and you’d better jolly-well believe it! His response is not to Descend into pointless arguments about what people expect of a Messiah and whether he is fulfilling their expectations. He simply draws attention to what is happening around him!

“The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them! Blessed is anyone who doesn’t take offence at me!”

It’s about the strongest argument there is. Apart from the fact that, as you doubtless know, this is a direct fulfilment of Isaiah’s prophecy about all that a Messiah should be, he simply

draws attention to what is going on around him! Instead of trying to justify himself to a bunch of men who just wouldn't get it – he says “look, here is the fruit of my Messiahship!” Now, think back to Mary's prophecy about the humble being lifted up. About the justice she craves for the people. Then go and speak to the people Jesus has encountered...

If you can't see how Jesus is fulfilling his Messianic calling – you are asking the wrong people and looking in the wrong place! This was supposed to be good news to the poor! Why not ask the people whose lives are actually being touched by this Messiah? Throughout the ministry of Jesus, there is a crowd of people baying for his blood, and a crowd of people throwing their hats in the air.

I wonder which crowd we belong to? Really! If Jesus came today, he is more likely to upset rather than fulfil our expectations about what a Messiah should do. And the more we know about what a Messiah should do – the more baffled we are likely to be! That, is the logic of the gospels!

And yet, those who understand him most fully, are those who receive him most fully. The people for whom he came! Those who are ready to receive him. Not simply tolerate Jesus, or invite him to a dinner party, or admire his teaching and his action. But those who actually engage with this Jesus on his own terms! Because, the likelihood is – that we all belong to that bunch of men who just didn't get him!

What does it mean then, in worship – to encounter the Jesus who is not going to fit into mould we have for him. What does it mean to encounter this Jesus who has his own plans for our lives, at whatever stage of life we are... What does it mean to encounter this Jesus, before whom all hearts are open and all desires known. Not Jesus the puppet, Not Jesus the circus monkey who exists to endorse all that we know and love about the world. But Jesus the subvertor, who subverts even those who regard themselves as subversive! Jesus who desires to get to the roots of who we are, even if we already consider ourselves radical. Jesus who is not just an ideal to be implemented, but a disturbing, disruptive person to be encountered.

Do we really expect anything less in our worship? Because this, after all, seems to be the point of today's reading: whether we will allow all of our preconceptions about the Messiah, to be touched by the Messiah himself? If not, we are destined to remain amongst that bunch of men who just don't get it!

Do we really want to encounter the Jesus of Scripture in the worship at Bloomsbury? Or are we destined to be those who just don't get it?

Do we really want to be a part of what God is doing in the world – on his terms, not our own: starting with the uncomfortable stuff of our own lives rather than the safe questions about political transformation – or are we destined to be those who just get it?

Do we really want to be agents of God's grace? Or are we too immersed in our version of pastoral care, or political action or liturgical correctness, to ever encounter the real Jesus. Are we destined to remain among those two dimensional characters who are more likely to offer the 30 year old Messiah our advice, destined to be those who just don't get it?

Or could we possibly be amongst those who find themselves throwing their hats in the air when they encounter this Jesus as he really is, on his own terms.

Could we, by God's grace, be among those whose sight has been restored, whose ears have been opened, and who are able at last, to walk?

Could we, by God's grace, be among those who dead who are raised up?

Could we, by God's grace, be among those who take no offence at the real Jesus?

Could we allow this Jesus to touch us in the depths of our being – where no one else is allowed to go?

Could we allow this Jesus to bring healing where we need it most, but dare not acknowledge it?

Could we, bring our lives before him as Mary did – let it be to me, according to thy will.

Or – in other words – could we worship this Jesus.

Are we among those men who just didn't get it?