

The Real Jesus

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[0:00] Good morning, everyone, and delighted to share in Johnny's welcome to you this morning as we journey with Jesus. We've been doing that for a number of weeks now, going through Luke's Gospel. Two purposes in journeying with Jesus.

One is to learn about Jesus, who he is, why he came, what he did, and the other is to learn from Jesus, both from his example and from his teaching.

So if you've got a Bible, you might like to turn to Luke chapter 11, no, chapter 7, sorry, and we're going to read verses 11 to 35. It will also appear on the screen in front of me, Luke chapter 7.

Verse 11 says, Soon afterwards Jesus went to a town called Nain, and his disciples and a large crowd went along with him. As he approached the town gate, a dead person was being carried out, the only son of his mother, and she was a widow, and a large crowd from the town was with her. When the Lord saw her, his heart went out to her, and he said, Don't cry. Then he went up and touched the coffin, and those carrying it stood still.

[1:08] He said, Young man, I say to you, get up. The dead man sat up and began to talk, and Jesus gave him back to his mother. They were all filled with awe and praised God.

A great prophet has appeared among us, they said. God has come to help his people. The news about Jesus spread throughout Judea and the surrounding country. John's disciples told him about all these things.

Calling two of them, he sent them to the Lord to ask, Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else? When the men came to Jesus, they said, John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?

At that very time, Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses, and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard.

The blind receive sight, the lame walk. Those who have leprosy are cured, the dead hear, The dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

[2:20] Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me. After John's messengers left, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John. What did you go out into the desert to see?

A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear expensive clothes and endowed in luxury are in palaces.

But what did you go out to see? A prophet. Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.

I tell you, among those born of women, there is no one greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

All the people, even the tax collectors, when they heard Jesus' words, acknowledged that God's way was right, because they had been baptized by John. But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John.

[3:28] To what, then, can I compare the people of this generation? What are they like? They're like children sitting in the marketplace and calling out to each other. We played the flute for you, and you did not dance.

We sang a dirge, and you did not cry. For John the Baptist came neither eating bread nor drinking wine, and you say, he has a demon. The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and you say, he is a glutton and a drinker, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.

But wisdom is proved right by all her children. Thank God I'm sure we'll bless his word as we consider it together. Let's take time just to pray now. Open our eyes, Lord.

We want to see Jesus. To reach out and touch him and say that we love him. Open our ears, Lord, and help us to listen. Open our eyes, Lord.

We want to see Jesus. Amen. Amen. As I've been preparing for this morning, there is one question that has been going through my mind time and time again.

[4:37] I just couldn't get away from it as I was thinking about this passage. And that question is, is my perception of Jesus based on my personality and my perspective?

Or put it a bit more simply in a way I can pronounce, do I want Jesus to be like me? Now you look at that and you immediately think that's the wrong way around. It's not that I want Jesus to be like me, I want to be like Jesus.

But isn't it much easier to think that we can be like Jesus if we start by thinking Jesus is a bit like me, only without all my flaws? Jesus has the same kind of view on life that I do.

He has the same preferences. He has the same priorities in his life. And perhaps even he has the same what people would call my prejudices. If Jesus was here today, he would share the kind of lifestyle that I have.

He would probably have the same political views that I do. And it's very easy for us to build a picture of Jesus that is essentially an image of ourselves, but made perfect because we know Jesus was sinless.

[5:51] And I think in this passage, what Jesus is addressing is the kind of attitude that is like that. He has people who want Jesus to be like them. So we've got John the Baptist, who wants Jesus to come with a message of judgment and actually to institute that judgment in the land.

We've got the scribes and the Pharisees, teachers of the law, who want Jesus to be like them and to keep well away from anyone who is sinful or isn't in the same way of thinking as they are.

And so the challenge this morning, I think, for me, and there'll be lots more as we go through, but the key challenge for me this morning has been, how much do I try to make Jesus in my image?

And how much am I willing to come to the Gospels and to read the account of Jesus and to understand from them what he is like, what his priorities were, how I should be in my life?

Yes, I want to be like Jesus, but to be like Jesus, I need to really understand what Jesus is like himself and not just transfer onto him everything that I think is important in life.

So let's take that challenge, take it away with us and think about what is my perception of Jesus? Is it based on my personality and my perspectives in life?

[7:12] Or is it actually based on what I learn about him from the Bible? So in this passage, we've got really four sections and it's a bit of a preacher's dream because without any difficulty, I've managed both alliteration and rhyming in my headings for this morning.

So it should be relatively easy to remember. The first is slightly separate from the following three and I've called that compassion.

So this is the incident of the raising of the son of the widow of Nain. The first time in the Gospels that we read of this greatest of all miracles of Jesus bringing back to life someone who had died. Now, if we look at the flow of the chapter in Luke, it's always good to see things in context. It's fairly easy to see how this follows on from what we were looking at last week. Last week was largely about authority.

It was about the authority the centurion had and how he could see from that the insight he got into the authority of Jesus and particularly the authority of Jesus over illness that he was able to cure the servant from a distance.

[8:18] This passage in some ways takes that concept further because it says Jesus not only has authority over illness, he also has authority over death. And the thought of authority comes out again in the passage because it's the first time in Luke's Gospel that he refers to Jesus as the Lord rather than saying Jesus.

He talks about him as the Lord representing his authority. So from that point of view, it's easy to see where it fits in. But as we look at this incident, there's a key phrase which I think explains it much better.

And the phrase in the NIV says that Jesus' heart went out to her, that is the son's mother. In other versions it says Jesus had compassion on her.

This miracle is unusual for another way, not just because Jesus raised someone from the dead, it's also unusual because most of the miracles Jesus performed, certainly the miracles of healing, he did because someone came to him and asked for it.

So again, a good example in last week's account of the centurion who sent these people to Jesus to ask him to heal his servant. And that happens regularly through the Gospels and quite often Jesus will say, your faith has saved you.

[9:36] In other words, because you took the initiative and trusted in me, that is why I performed this great miracle. There's nothing of that here. It is entirely Jesus taking the initiative.

No sign that anyone asked Jesus to raise this man from the dead. Indeed, probably most people would think it would be impossible if he was beyond any help. But it was Jesus who takes the initiative.

And he takes the initiative because he had compassion on the widow because his heart went out to her. Let's take a minute to try and get the scene in our minds.

So Jesus has been going around, he's been doing these marvellous miracles and the healing of his centurion servant was probably the most dramatic so far in his ministry. And he's got a great crowd of people who are following him.

And there's a real buzz about it. There's a real excitement about the fact that Jesus is doing things which are different, that he's standing up to what they see as the establishment that oppresses them.

[10:38] We can see it to some extent kind of mirrored in some of the things that have been happening in the political world over the last months and years in terms of people like Donald Trump and what's happened with him in the States.

Some of the things that have happened in the UK in the Labour Party, for instance, with Jeremy Corbyn. And people saying, here's someone who is on the side of the common people and who's not afraid to stand up to the establishment.

And even though the people didn't see beyond that, some of them probably didn't in terms of Jesus at that point, that was the kind of impression people had. Here is someone who's different, who's on our side, and who's not afraid of the religious leaders who've been putting us down.

And so around Jesus, there's a real buzz, there's a real excitement. And then they come towards this town of Nain and coming in the opposite direction, there's a funeral procession.

And with all the sadness and the grief in that, a particularly powerful one, it's a widow who's there. She's lost her husband. Now she's lost her only son.

[11:42] And her situation is absolutely desperate. And in those days, the burial, or still today in the Middle East, indeed the burial would have been on the same day that the young man had died.

His body would be on, it says a coffin in the NIV. It was more like a plank, I think, a bier, some people call it. It would be exposed. You would literally be looking death in the face as you looked at that scene.

And Jesus, looking at that, his heart goes out to the woman. He has compassion on her. And he does three things. First thing he does is he says to her, don't cry.

So he goes and he comforts her and reassures her. He then touches the coffin or the plank. Now that would, in the sight of the Jews, make him richly unclean.

So this was a departure from convention that Jesus was doing that. And then he tells the young man to get up and he talks with him. Jesus goes into the situation.

[12:44] He sees something happening. He's not filled with embarrassment that his people are all happy and these people are mourning. He sees something there. He has compassion on the widow and he acts upon it.

And if we're wanting to be like Jesus, if we want to understand what Jesus is like, then understanding the compassion of Jesus and having that ourselves is really, really important. There are lots of reasons why as Christians we serve and maybe serve well. Some people serve because they have a real zeal for the Lord and that's good. They want to serve the Lord. They want to win others for him. They want to do whatever they can for the one who died for them. Entirely commendable. Some people are more motivated by duty. They recognize Jesus as Lord and they want to do whatever is needed to serve him and to serve others in his name. And that is good as well. Both of these are good reasons for serving Jesus. [13:42] But alongside them, we need to have a real compassion for others. When we see someone who's got a need and their circumstances are hard, perhaps desperate, our hearts should go out to them and we should think, what can I do to help in that situation to show something of the kind of love the Lord Jesus has?

Very easy when we come into church on a Sunday to think everything's great here. The music's wonderful. There's good chat and company. The preaching is generally very good. And it's a good place to be. But you don't have to look far in our church or any other church to find people who are really suffering. Someone who is desperately ill and who needs people to go with her, to go to her and to pray with her. Someone who's been housebound for many years and needs people just to visit him and to tell him what's going on in the church and to make him still feel part of things here. People who are suffering from poor mental health, who need to believe that people understand how things are for them and are able to support and help them.

As we dig beneath the surface in our church, there are many, many people who need our compassion and who need our help as they seek to struggle with the things in their lives. [15:06] I think the challenge to me and I have to challenge to you as well is not enough to be motivated just by zeal or just by a sense of duty. Ultimately, Jesus' business with us is a people business and it is seeing others in need and doing what we can to meet that need.

We need to have the compassion that Jesus had. So that's the first part of the passage. The next bit I've called confirmation.

So this is the beginning of the bit about John the Baptist. John the Baptist is in prison. John has said just a little bit too much. That was very uncomfortable for Herod and his family and he's been thrown into prison for it and he is facing the prospect that almost certainly he will lose his life for what he said.

We're seeing things that were perfectly true and needed to be said but he's probably in his final stretch of his life. And John is in prison and he's looking out and he's saying, I hear about Jesus. I hear about the buzz there is around him. I hear about the things he's doing. But I'm no longer sure that he is the promised Messiah. And maybe that's partly just John's situation.

[16:21] He's lonely. He's cut off. He's imprisoned. And it becomes very difficult for him. But I think very much it's because John looks and he looks at Jesus and he says, this isn't what I expected.

Jesus isn't acting the way that I thought he would. John's message initially was very much one of judgment. That God was going to come and to judge his people through the Messiah. That he would take the axe to the tree is the metaphor that John uses as he preaches beside the Jordan. And he looked at Jesus and he thought, here is the man who's going to do it. Who's going to free the country from the oppression of the Romans. Who's going to make sure that her and his family get the judgment that's coming to them. Who's going to expose the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and make sure that they're deposed from the kind of position they've had. And to bring to our land, to our nation, the freedom, the justice, and the true knowledge of God that it should have. That is what John expected Jesus to do.

[17:26] And he looks out and he sees Jesus doing great things, doing great miracles, very popular with the people. And he's thinking, have I got this wrong? I thought he was the Messiah. I thought he was the one who's going to come and liberate Israel.

But there's no sign that he's doing that. And so John sends his disciples to Jesus. And Jesus doesn't immediately reply to them.

But he shows them what he's about. He shows them the miracles that he does. The curing of diseases, illnesses, evil spirits, and so on. And then he says to them, look at what you've seen. Go back and tell John. Now Luke doesn't explicitly say it, but as the disciples went back and told John what Jesus said, John would immediately be reminded of what was said, particularly in the prophet Isaiah, but certainly in the Old Testament about the Messiah who was coming. He would be someone who would have particular concern for the ill, and particularly for the poor, as it is said at the end, good news is proclaimed to the poor. So in other words, Jesus is saying to John, don't doubt.

[18:32] I'm not coming to do exactly what you expected at this stage. There will be a day when Jesus will come as judge. I'm not doing exactly what you expected at this stage, but I am the Messiah.

I am the promised one. I can give you that confirmation. Yes, some of us at times have doubts. Maybe all of us have times have doubts. Our faith is weak, and we look at things and perhaps not as we would hope or not as we would like, and we begin to doubt our faith, perhaps even begin to doubt the basis for our faith through the Lord Jesus.

And the way to address that, I think quite clearly, is to do what Jesus did, is to say, I want to look and see what Jesus really is like.

Jesus said to John's disciples, you observe me, now go back and tell John what I'm doing. And it's the same for us. We need, if we've got doubts, if we're not sure about things, to get back and to read about Jesus and to do it with an open mind, looking for God to guide us as we do and to reveal the truths to us.

In the vestibule at the front, there are lots of copies of Luke's Gospel. If you're having any doubt or if you're struggling in any way with your faith, can I suggest you take one of them and just read through it and see Jesus in it.

[19:54] See what Jesus is like, what he does, what he says, how he died for us and rose again. And with an open heart, ask God to reveal to you the truths of his word.

We confirm our faith when we look at Jesus and when we see what he is all about. Confirmation to John. John's disciples then go away and Jesus gives a commendation for John.

Interesting, he got the disciples to go away. I'm not quite sure where that was, but he certainly wanted the people who were around him to understand John and particularly, I think, to understand that this wasn't what John was, someone really backsliding and they shouldn't really have bothered with him at all.

And so Jesus then commends John to them. And he said, well, why did you go out into the desert? Why did you go to the place where John was? Was it to see a reed swing in the wind?

Not interpreting exactly what Jesus means by this. Is it, you wouldn't go to the desert just to see the reed swing in the wind, would you? You can see them anywhere. You weren't going on a sightseeing tour. Or perhaps it was giving them the reassurance that John wasn't someone who was easily swayed, that he was firm in his views, that he was strong in what he said.

[21:05] So they shouldn't worry about the fact he'd asked these questions. Then he says, were you going to look for someone dressed in fine clothes? No, they were going to someone who was dressed in camel's hair and probably looks rather strange.

They went to find someone who they believed and rightly believed was a prophet. Someone who came to bring them God's word, to help them to understand it and to challenge them from it.

And John, Jesus said, that's exactly what you got with John. Indeed, you got a very special prophet. You got a prophet who had been prophesied about himself in the Old Testament. The one who fulfilled the Old Testament prophecy of a messenger who had come before Jesus.

I think it's in that sense that Jesus says that John is the greatest that has been born of women. There were many great prophets in the Old Testament. We could think of people like Elijah, the Elisha.

We could think of the prophets who wrote many of the books towards the end of the Old Testament. Great men. But what was different with John was John was the immediate forerunner of the Lord Jesus.

[22:15] He himself had been prophesied about. He was the one who introduced Jesus to the world as Jesus came, particularly when he came to be baptized and also in the instance we read about in John chapter 1.

So Jesus said, John, there's no one born of women who is greater than John. And then he says something very surprising. He said, yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.

So that if we believe in the Lord Jesus, that is you and me, Jesus is saying in some sense that we are greater than John. Now it's not that we are more zealous for God than John.

It's not that our message and the way it produces is more powerful than John's. I think the privilege we have is we have the full understanding of the Lord Jesus as we do if we read about him in the scripture.

And we have the relationship with God as our father if we're trusting in Jesus in a way that saints in the Old Testament even the finest of them didn't have.

[23:19] So it's a question of privilege that makes us greater than John, not our personality or our character. Jesus says, I commend to you, John, he's a great man.

And some people say, yes, we identify with that, we went out, we were baptized by John, we confessed our sins, we can see the greatness of John. And some people hadn't got involved in all that stuff.

They said, no, we don't believe in John, we're rightly in prison, he's a man who should be locked away and they would have nothing to do with him. And so Jesus then turns his attention particularly to those in this latter category.

And we get this little parable. I was quite struck by one book I was reading which called it The Parable of the Brats. I quite like that, The Parable of the Brats. So you've got these children that are sitting around and they're kind of thinking about playing.

And some of the children say, we want to play funerals, let's play sad tunes and we'll pretend we're in a funeral procession, some of us will be professional mourners. Other people say, no, we really want to play weddings and let's play nice cheerful tunes and the flute and we'll dance along with one another.

[24:25] And neither group is willing to compromise or to go along with whatever the game is. If things are not being done in their way and how they think it should be, then they're not going to get involved in it.

And Jesus says, that's exactly what the religious leaders of his day were like. Unless people were exactly like them and followed exactly the way that they felt things should be done, they weren't going to get involved, they were going to condemn them and they were going to do whatever they could to get rid of them.

So John the Baptist came with this great message of judgment. He lived a very ascetic life out in the wilderness. He ate locusts and honey. He had this camel hair cloak. He was very different. He didn't get involved in the normal social things of life.

And they said, well, he's mad. He must have a demon or something. Jesus comes and takes exactly the opposite position in some ways to John. He gets involved in the social life.

He even goes and associates with those who would be regarded as sinners. As those whom the religious people, the people who thought they mattered would really look down on and say, we can have nothing to do with them because they're not following the law of God as we see it.

[25:39] And they could have John on the one hand because he was too austere and too stern. And Jesus on the other hand because he was too relaxed, because he came with too much willingness to associate with other people.

And they would never be happy unless Jesus and John were exactly as they were. Again, it's this thing I started with.

Do I want Jesus to be like me? And perhaps we need to sometimes examine ourselves and say, well, do we have something of the attitude of these religious leaders and Pharisees in the way we look at things, in the way we look at the work that is done for the Lord Jesus?

It's not quite the way we want it to be done and we don't think it's appropriate or are we willing to see God at work and to rejoice in it even though it may come in very different ways from different

people at different times.

Sometimes God would condemn us for our attitudes towards his work and by inference towards the Lord Jesus. Let's just finish with three phrases from the passage.

[26:48] Hopefully we'll bring home some of what we've been talking about. So the first one is in verse 17 and the crowd say as they witness Jesus' miracle God has come to help his people.

Literally it says God has visited his people. And this is about recognizing Jesus as the one who came from God, who came with God's word, who came with God's power, who came with God's compassion.

salvation. And particularly in our day as the one who came with the compassion of God for our sins and our helplessness. The raising of the widow of Nain's son is very much in many ways a kind of acted out version of what salvation through Jesus is all about.

Someone who is dead, completely oblivious to things, no hope because it was gone for them. And Jesus comes into that situation and he brings hope and he brings life.

And through his death on the cross, God has come to help his people through Jesus as he took on himself the punishment that was due to us. So if we simply trust in him, we can have eternal life, we can have hope, we can have a real future.

[28:06] God has come to help his people. Have we all taken advantage of that help that's offered, that salvation through the Lord Jesus, the new life that Christ can give us.

Second key phrase is at the end of the encounter with John's disciples. Verse 23, Jesus says, blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me.

Some versions say blessed is anyone who is not offended by me. I saw a bit of a paraphrase, blessed is the one who doesn't feel let down by me.

And maybe there's a sense that John felt let down. And this was very much addressed to John and his disciples. Relevant to us as well. Because what this says is it is possible to be offended by Jesus.

It is possible to stumble as we look at him. We could be like these Pharisees and these religious leaders and come to Jesus with our perception of what he should be like.

[29:09] And if he's not like that, then we reject him and say, no, I don't want anything to do with that. A lot of people around about in our world would say I don't want anything to do with Christianity because.

And it's very often to do with what they would see as prejudice or can be to do with why doesn't God do more about his pain in the world and so on. And Jesus doesn't necessarily do everything as we expect.

And that can be a stumbling block. But Jesus says we need to look beyond the superficial and look beyond our prejudices, our perspectives in life and to get God's view of the world and to see Jesus through that lens and not stumble, not be offended because of him.

Jesus, particularly at the end of the passage, in some ways he always went out of his way to offend the Pharisees, certainly to bring them to a head and to help them to understand just how different they are from him. And sometimes Jesus will challenge us in that kind of way and we need to be honest with ourselves and say, well, is that a challenge I need to address and to do something about or am I just going to be put off Jesus by it?

And then right at the end, Jesus says wisdom is proved right by all her children. The equivalent of the passage in Matthew says wisdom is proved right by her deeds and I think that gets the same sense across.

[30:34] Jesus is saying the wise person is the one who trusts me and who follows me. who doesn't get put off by all the things that go on round about him, but particularly by their own views and their own attitudes.

Who recognizes that true wisdom is found in the Son of God who came into this world to be the saviour of the world. And how is that proved to be right?

How is it proved to be true wisdom? It is proved to be true wisdom by the effect it has on those who follow Jesus. By the effect that comes from knowing him, from loving him, by sharing his priorities, by having the kind of compassion that he talked about and showed earlier on.

Wisdom is proved right by all her children. I guess the challenge from that for those of us who are following Jesus and who want to serve him is can people look at us and say yes I can see that there is something different about them, it is something that is good because they have a real care and compassion for others and they love the Lord Jesus and want to serve him and then they are attracted to the Lord because they see that there is truth in what is said because it makes that real difference in our lives.

The three things take away. God has come to help his people. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me. Wisdom has proved right by all her children.

[32:03] Let's examine our hearts today. Let's think about how much are my attitudes towards Jesus based on my feelings and my comfort, what feels right to me.

How much is it based on what I learned from Jesus in the Bible and from sincerely wanting to know and to follow him. And if we need to, let's make the appropriate changes by trusting in him or by rededicating ourselves to him or by showing more of his love to those round about us.

Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word. We thank you for the power with which it comes to us from the Lord Jesus that he is not afraid to be controversial, to condemn those who are not following your way.

But we thank you too for the real compassion that we see for the raising of the dead, for the healing of the sick, for the hope that is given to the poor. Help us all to understand who Jesus is, why he came to this world, and how we can have complete forgiveness and hope through him.

And as we do that, help us to build up our knowledge of him based on your word, and help us to become more like the real Jesus that we may show to others the love, the compassion, the care that he had.

[33:22] We thank you for our time together. We pray you'll be with us now as we join together in remembering more about Jesus and particularly what he's done for us on the cross. Be with us in our time of communion, we give you thanks and commit ourselves to you.

In Jesus' name, Amen.