

Re-engaging with Jesus. Matthew 13:53-14:21

Not everyone likes Jesus

When you've been a Christian for a while, or when you mainly hang around Christians, it can come as something of a shock to be reminded that not everyone likes Jesus. And you tend to think – if only they could get to know Him better, know Him as you do, that would change their minds.

If they could come to know He lives, and is Kind

Faithful

Forgiving

Powerful

I mean, what's not to like about Jesus?

But then you remember, or you should when prompted, that in the gospels there were people who knew Jesus, who had met Him, some who had eaten with Him – and didn't like Him, in fact hated Him.

What wasn't to like about Jesus then?

This morning we are going to look at why some of Jesus' contemporaries had no time for him, and how Jesus responded

Do this

To give you, if you are not yet a believer in Jesus, an opportunity to reflect on your own reasons for not believing – consider whether the issue in your relationship to Jesus is you, or Jesus

And if you are a believer its an opportunity

To test whether the Jesus you believe in is the Jesus of the gospels, not a Jesus limited by your familiarity with Him

And To be reminded of both Jesus' offensiveness and His goodness

We are going to rejoin the gospel story of Jesus with one such group of people who didn't like Jesus, the inhabitants of Jesus' home town Nazareth

At this point We are about half way through the gospel story

So already we've been told of Jesus' birth and temptation

Experienced his teaching

Heard reports of his mighty works – cleansing lepers, casting out demons, healing the sick, restoring sight to the blind

Just prior to this Matthew has repeated for us some of Jesus' parables

And we've already encountered a group of people who really didn't like Jesus

The religious leaders and the party of piety, the Pharisees – who want people to attribute Jesus' work to the devil and have started plotting to kill Jesus

Matthew 12: ¹⁴ But the Pharisees went out and plotted against him, how they might kill him.

We pick up the story with Jesus teaching in the synagogue of his hometown.

²⁴ When the Pharisees heard this, they said, "This man drives out demons only by Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons."

Jesus

Offending 13:53-58

Matthew 13: ⁵³ When Jesus had finished these parables, he left there. ⁵⁴ He went to his hometown and began to teach them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished and said, "Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? ⁵⁵ Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother called Mary, and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? ⁵⁶ And his sisters, aren't they all with us? So where does he get all these things?" ⁵⁷ And they were offended by him.

*Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his hometown and in his household."
⁵⁸ And he did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.*

You'd expect the 1600 -2000 inhabitants of Nazareth to be more like the Serbians welcoming back Novak Djokovic.

He is the local boy made good, achieving remarkable things in the wider world.

They acknowledge that, v. 54, acknowledge his wisdom – the depth of his teaching, and his power and mighty works. These are undeniable.

But rather than rejoicing in his success, they are offended v. 57 by him, they stumble at his greatness.

Why?

"Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? ⁵⁵ Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother called Mary, and his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? ⁵⁶ And his sisters, aren't they all with us? So where does he get all these things?"

We know Him, know His family

He's one of us, and no better than us,

This wisdom and miraculous power couldn't belong to him by right

And there's a Hint - *So where does he get all these things?* - that his possession of these things is slightly suspect, comes from a shonky source

For the inhabitants of Nazareth Jesus can't be anything but the familiar Jesus, the carpenter's son

Who He is, what He can do, has to be kept within the limits of their expectations, and to suggest he is anything more is offensive

And we can relate to Jesus in the same way.

We may have formed an image of Jesus at some time in our lives, maybe even in our childhood—
from all kinds of sources - our family, or schooling, or Sunday school, or even a musical

And Jesus can never be anything other or more than the Jesus we've got used to

And so we might think of Jesus as some kind of family mascot, present at family events and there to
help our family life be better

Or a popular hippy kind of revolutionary with a message of radical love

Or just a kind friend to share your troubles with

Or an occasional moral consultant

And that is all he is allowed to be, the place he has in your life

And so there are Things he can't be heard to say that might challenge the role you have assigned him

Whether it is His demand you give up all to follow Him

Or be wise by doing all that He teaches – whether that is in keeping your word or living a sexually
chaste life

That He be Lord, the boss, of your life

And there are areas of life outside his concern or help

You've got him in a box and like the people of Nazareth you would be offended if He claimed more
authority over your life, or asked to be trusted for more

We can be like the people of Nazareth, and just as it was to their loss v. 58, so it will be to our loss

There is a Cost to trying to keep Jesus small, within the limits you allow Him

Of not trusting Him as the one who is as His words and works reveal Him to be

And that cost is Never knowing the fullness of His power to help and save

In response to their questioning Jesus quotes a proverbial saying *Jesus said to them, "A prophet is
not without honor except in his hometown and in his household."*

Jesus is Not saying he is a prophet, but his experience is like the prophets, people sent from God
with God's message

Like them because the source of his wisdom and mighty works is not in his upbringing, family
connections, training – anything His neighbours can see and identify

But from God

And in quoting the saying Jesus is asking them to consider whether their own reaction mightn't
suggest He is from God, is more than they will let Him be.

He is giving them an opportunity to reconsider him

For Jesus is more than a carpenter – that is plain to many of his contemporaries, who are seeking an
adequate explanation for what He is teaching and doing

People are talking about him

Later the apostles will report 16:14 that some are saying he is Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets, or even, like Herod, John the Baptist

They are looking for a precedent, a category into which they can fit his activity

- What is he? a teacher, rabbi, prophet?

And Herod, starting to receive reports about Jesus, is also searching for some explanation of what he is hearing

Puzzling 14:1-2

Matthew 14: At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus. ² “This is John the Baptist,” he told his servants. “He has been raised from the dead, and that’s why miraculous powers are at work in him.”

This Herod is Herod Antipas, one of three Herods mentioned in the New Testament.

There is the Herod of Jesus’ birth [Matt. 2], Herod the great, Antipas’ father

And there is the Herod of Acts 12 [Acts 12:1], Herod Agrippa 1, Antipas’ nephew [son of Antipas’ half brother Aristobulus].

And there is this Herod, Antipas, the tetrarch of Galilee and Perea – that is a ruler recognised by the Romans, but with smaller dominions and less in status than a king, although sometimes called king

And He is puzzled, as are others, by what he hears Jesus is saying and doing.

But his explanation - *“This is John the Baptist,”* - is not all that convincing.

He probably doesn’t mean a resurrection to never die again, but a temporary appearance on earth of the deceased John in this form, the form of Jesus – and so he has these powers of a spirit from the other side of the grave.

It is not convincing because Jesus was already active while John was alive [Matthew 11:2-6], a detail probably unknown to Herod who is playing catch up.

But Herod’s superstitious response gives Matthew an opportunity to introduce the story of the death of John the Baptist as he fills us in on why that explanation occurs to Herod.

This is a deliberate interruption in the story of Jesus’ ministry to go back to John’s death that happened earlier. Its like a flashback in a movie, giving vital information from the past that helps understand why the characters are in the situation they now find themselves in in the present.

Endangered – a prophetic martyrdom 14:3-12

Matthew 14: ³ For Herod had arrested John, chained him, and put him in prison on account of Herodias, his brother Philip’s wife, ⁴ since John had been telling him, “It’s not lawful for you to have her.” ⁵ Though Herod wanted to kill John, he feared the crowd since they regarded John as a prophet.

⁶ When Herod’s birthday celebration came, Herodias’s daughter danced before them and pleased Herod. ⁷ So he promised with an oath to give her whatever she asked. ⁸ Prompted by her mother, she

answered, "Give me John the Baptist's head here on a platter." ⁹ Although the king regretted it, he commanded that it be granted because of his oaths and his guests. ¹⁰ So he sent orders and had John beheaded in the prison. ¹¹ His head was brought on a platter and given to the girl, who carried it to her mother. ¹² Then his disciples came, removed the corpse, buried it, and went and reported to Jesus.

The interruption makes us ask why Matthew has included this story here, now

Amongst some of the early believers for whom Matthew was writing there was a natural interest in what happened to John, for some of the early believers in Jesus had first been disciples of John

But there is a bigger reason. The stories of John and Jesus are inseparable.

At the beginning of the gospel we learnt that John was sent to prepare people for Jesus' coming and witness to Him [Matthew 3]

John is the herald of the King, Jesus the King

Later, coming down from the mount of transfiguration, Our Lord says that the way people treat John will be the way people treat Him.

Matthew 17: ¹² "But I tell you: Elijah has already come, and they didn't recognize him. On the contrary, they did whatever they pleased to him. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." ¹³ Then the disciples understood that he had spoken to them about John the Baptist.

When challenged by the Pharisees Jesus links attitudes to John's authority as a messenger of God to attitudes to His authority

21: ²⁴ Jesus answered them, "I will also ask you one question, and if you answer it for me, then I will tell you by what authority I do these things. ²⁵ Did John's baptism come from heaven, or was it of human origin?"

The stories of John and Jesus are intertwined, part of the one work of God in sending His promised Saving King.

In telling us what happened to John Matthew is giving us a prophetic picture of what will happen to Jesus, of what happens when the claims of God confront the powerful of this world.

In introducing John's death Matthew is also reminding us of the bigger stage on which Jesus' ministry is being acted out.

So as Jesus' ministry has been presented in His dealings with the people of the towns and villages, the crowds of Jerusalem, and the religious leaders. It is very self contained amongst the Jewish community and their religious debates.

But here we are reminded there is a bigger world in which Jesus' ministry is conducted, a world of politics and power, a world with direct connections to the pagan Roman world power.

And the account reminds us that asserting the claims of God – as John did in saying Herod's marriage to Herodias his brother's wife was not lawful [14:3-4], saying it is the law of God the King that all, even the powerful of this world, should obey, has real world consequences

It can, as Herod feared, create unrest in the people, threaten the stability of political regimes

And it can incite Resentment and hatred in those with the power to silence those who come in the name of God

And as a prophetic picture the story of John's death exposes the motives of the world that will condemn Jesus to death before we have the crowd pressuring Pilate to crucify Jesus.

What do we see of that world of the powerful?

It is a world where there is no fear of God. Herod responds to John on the assumption God is not involved, that he doesn't have to think too hard about what God thinks of him. In Herod's view all he has to worry about is what other people think, how they might react. This world operates on the assumption that human power is all there is and it alone determines the course of the world, and people's lives.

And so What governs Herod's actions is fear of people, of what they might think of him

He does not kill John v. 5 because 'he feared the crowd'

He proceeds to kill John v. 9 to protect his reputation with his powerful guests

This is power that is insecure, a prisoner to its own fears, its actions motivated, as we see with Herod, love of its own power and status and a determination to maintain them

And where those in power are concerned above all for what others think and for protecting their own power, we see this is a power that can be used by those with personal agendas, or a passionate hatred of God's servants, like Herodias, or the religious authorities, to destroy their enemies.

This is a sad story

But here you have the end of Jesus' ministry prefigured

He comes into the world asserting that God is King, His Kingdom is near, calling not just Herod but all to repent

Like John He irritates vested interests – offends those whose sin he exposes, the self righteous religious.

Who will incite his execution by a human power that recognises no other power, and is anxious to protect the stability of its reign, whose only interest is in protecting its power

Herod's dealings with John exposes why in the end some find Jesus so irritating

Having already decided God is not involved in the world

They Assess Him solely in relation to their own interests

Does he Advance or hinder them?

Increase or decrease their happiness?

Authority always lies with them, and so they can never be comfortable with Jesus who is insistent on the authority of God, and that His word should rule their lives, and they should change their lives to conform to what God says.

Maybe that is you, and what is at issue is your prior belief that God is uninvolved with the world, a belief Jesus' very presence challenges.

Responding 14:13-21

*Matthew 14:*¹³ *When Jesus heard about it, he withdrew from there by boat to a remote place to be alone. When the crowds heard this, they followed him on foot from the towns.*¹⁴ *When he went ashore, he saw a large crowd, had compassion on them, and healed their sick.*

¹⁵ *When evening came, the disciples approached him and said, "This place is deserted, and it is already late. Send the crowds away so that they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves."*

¹⁶ *"They don't need to go away," Jesus told them. "You give them something to eat."*

¹⁷ *"But we only have five loaves and two fish here," they said to him.*

¹⁸ *"Bring them here to me," he said.*¹⁹ *Then he commanded the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves and the two fish, and looking up to heaven, he blessed them. He broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds.*²⁰ *Everyone ate and was satisfied. They picked up twelve baskets full of leftover pieces.*²¹ *Now those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.*

So what will Jesus do about this unbelief, the speculation about Him, and the implicit danger to Himself in the fate of John the Baptist

He will be Jesus, and continue His ministry vv. 13-21

But who is Jesus?

Someone who continues to defy categorisation and comparison

The feeding of the five thousand – men, apart from women and children v. 21 – which is recorded in all the gospels, stresses two things

Firstly, Jesus' compassion.

On hearing of Herod's speculation v. 2 He is wants to be alone v. 13

But the crowds watch the progress of the boat which can be seen from the hills surrounding the sea of Galilee – and travelling on foot get to the destination before Jesus

On see them Jesus could have got fed up, impatient, angry with their demands on Him. That is the way most of us react to the demands of others when we are weary with a lot on our minds

But Jesus doesn't. He has compassion – and heals.

Jesus does not turn away the needy. He considers the interests of others before His own, unlike Herod who was only thinking of Himself

And the story also stresses His spectacular power that gives a better feast than Herod's debauched party.

The dialogue with the disciples emphasises the impossibility of feeding this number with the meagre resources they have

But Jesus' multiplies the provision of creation, bread and fish, to meet their need. The disciples witness the creative power of God at work to satisfy the hungry

And there is no lack

v. 20-21

And this better and more wholesome feast is given not for the powerful but the poor and needy, the landless labourers of Galilee

There are echoes in this feeding of events in the Old Testament

Of Elisha feeding the sons of the prophets with twenty loaves [2 Kings 4:42-44]

And of Moses and the provision of manna feeding in the wilderness

But these parallels emphasise Jesus' difference

The numbers fed here dwarf those fed in 2 Kings – this is greater power, personally possessed

And as Jesus says in John 6:32-33, it wasn't Moses who provided the manna, but God

Here Jesus Himself provides for the crowds, distributing what they need through the apostles

He is greater than the greatest prophets, and in this mighty work seen to be more than a teacher, a rabbi.

And He is no political revolutionary.

He sends the crowds away v. 22 and withdraws to pray.

Matthew 14: ²²Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³After dismissing the crowds, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. Well into the night, he was there alone.

How does Jesus respond?

He acts in a way that makes the question of His identity more acute by not fitting easily into any of their existing categories

And he acts in a way that challenges the view that God is uninvolved in life, exercising Himself the creative power of God on earth

And that challenge will go on as the gospel continues.

Jesus will keep on asserting the claims of God on His people, on His world, by calling all to acknowledge God's rule by submitting to God's King, by listening to, trusting and obeying Himself, the Son sent into the world by the Father. Asserting the claims of God to a people who resent it.

And Jesus will keep on demonstrating in His own person the presence of God in His world to a people who want to think God has left the world to them, that their power rules.

And that clash of sovereignties, that fight over who rules, over who should be listened to, will climax in Jesus' death at the hands of the Herods of this world acting to protect their power

But not just in His death. For the God who has the power of life will expose the powerlessness of those whose only power is the power of death. He will overturn their judgments, reverse their sentences. God will raise the Lord Jesus from the dead, the Lord who has the power to raise all who trust Him to life at the last day.

Irritating or satisfying?

Some were just irritated by a Jesus who can't be contained within the limits they set for Him, a Jesus who won't be silenced from making the claim of our creator God to rule His world, to rule our lives.

But some found their hunger satisfied, their hurts healed, in His compassion and power.

Where did the difference lie?

The irritated, then and now, are those who think they have Jesus' measure, and then find a Jesus who won't be contained in the box they have constructed for Him, won't limit His call on their lives to what they feel comfortable with.

They are those who only want Jesus to conform to what they will let Him be, someone who will endorse their interests, accept their passions, support their ambitions.

But Jesus is Lord, and expects us to abandon our interests to pursue His, to turn away from sinful passions, to have no ambition but to follow Him.

And those who want to maintain that theirs is the only power and rule in their lives, who love their power to do as they will, they will also find Jesus in the end intolerable, for Jesus by His very presence, by the events recounted in the gospel – says God rules, and God give life. Life is not found in loving ourselves and our own rule, but in abandoning our rule of our own lives to confess that Jesus, the living Lord, should be listened to, trusted and obeyed.

Is that behind your problem with Jesus?

His insistence that He rules, rules over every area of your life, and its clash with your love of your own power to do whatever pleases you.

In that contest you will never win. He has life that can never be quenched, and He alone can share that life. To love your own power like Herod is to embrace death.

And the satisfied?

They are the hungry, the sick, the poor, who come to Jesus to receive what Jesus in His compassion can and will give

And if we knew ourselves truly we would know that includes us all

Hungry – for life, which we can't sustain in ourselves, for justice in a world where the powerful protect their power, for love in a world where we can be used, and then left

Where we are all, at different speeds and in different ways, sickening to death, unable to escape the reward of our sin, our ignoring, disobeying, rejecting of our Creator God

Poor, with nothing in ourselves with which we can buy life, or forgiveness

To the hungry, the dying, the poor in Spirit, the risen Jesus, who has all authority, authority to judge and forgive, gives in His compassion to all who come to Him forgiveness and life

Your need is not a burden on Him

And In Himself HE has more than enough to satisfy, for His is the power, and life, and love of God

The gospel does not only ask you to work out who you think Jesus is as it gives you the evidence that He is God with us, come amongst us to save

It asks you to work out who you think you are.

An equal with Jesus, insisting on the right to set the limits on who He can be and what He can do, denying yourself the experience of His power to save?

Your own sovereign, able to do as you will in the world, able to kill all who challenge your rule, a rule as we have seen that is always insecure, in fear of others?

Or needy, in need of help, unable to sustain yourself, heal yourself, save yourself?

The gospel asks, and every graveyard gives you the answer if you cannot find it in your own heart.

May God give you grace not just to see Jesus' glory, but yourself truly