

John 12:37-50

I did not speak on my own

Tim Anderson 11/2/2018

Have you ever noticed that people believe what they want to believe?
Not what the evidence suggests,
but what they would like to be true.

That's why Donald Trump tells lies and gets away with it so easily.
He tell people things that a portion of the population want to be true.
So they believe him.

People also change what they believe
when they want something different to be true.

My grandmother believed passionately for most of her life,
that you should get married before you live together.

But in her seventies, she changed her mind.

Was it a thought through re examination of her belief system?

Not at all.

Some of her grandchildren
started living with their boyfriends or girlfriends.

She wanted to believe that her grandchildren were good people.

So she changed what she believed
about living together before marriage.

Psychologists have shown
that most people make decisions based on their emotions
and then use reasoning to justify decisions they have already made.

In our passage today,
the crowds are not able to assess the evidence of Jesus correctly.

Jesus by his miracles has given them strong evidence
that he is who he says he is,

but they are unable to believe it.

Not because the evidence didn't stack up.

Not because they couldn't see the evidence.

But because they didn't want it to be true.

Their emotions made the decision for them.

But before you are too hard on the Jews,

our passage today also teaches us something,
that your emotions may not like.

You will have to weigh up the evidence,
and see if you are capable of believing it
in the face of emotional discomfort.

Are you up for the challenge?

Well here it is.

"Even after Jesus has performed so many signs in their presence,
they still would not believe in him."

Notice what it says.

The signs were performed in their presence.

There was no problem for them with the evidence.

They saw it with their own eyes.

They were there when Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.

They were there when Jesus fed the 5000.

They were there when Jesus turned the water into wine.

But they still would not believe in him.

Not 'they could not'.

They 'would not'.

They refused.

They were stubborn.

Well I'm sure you've run into stubborn before.

If you've brought up a toddler,
you know about stubborn.

And we adults haven't forgotten too much about stubbornness either.

But now we get to the bits which are challenging.

"This was to fulfil the word of Isaiah the prophet:

'Lord, who has believed our message

and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?'"

Their stubborn refusal to believe was prophesied 700 years before.

In Isaiah, those words are part of the Servant Song.

The one we read out every Easter.

"He was pierced for our transgressions.

He was crushed for our iniquities.

The punishment that bought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed."

And Isaiah is saying,
unless the arm of the Lord is revealed to you,
then you can't believe it.

What is the arm of the Lord?

It's the powerful action of God.

Unless that is supernaturally revealed to you by God,
then you are going to stay stubborn.

You won't believe.

In fact it gets worse.

Not only won't they believe.

They can't believe.

Here is what John says,

"For this reason they could not believe,
because, as Isaiah says elsewhere:

'He has blinded their eyes

and darkened their hearts,

so that they can neither see with their eyes,

and understand with their hearts,

nor turn - and I would heal them.'"

There you go.

That is the challenging teaching.

It's there in black and white.

People didn't believe in Jesus' miracles,

not because of a lack of evidence,

but because God blinded their eyes to the truth;

because God hardened their hearts to the truth.

There's no question that is what the Bible is teaching at this point.

This part of Isaiah is quoted elsewhere.

You can read the same kind of thing in Mark 4 and Mt 13.

There it is on the lips of Jesus.

But can you emotionally believe it?

I haven't run in to too many people

who embrace this part of Christian teaching

with the same joy they embrace John 3:16.

But it's here.

And it's here for our benefit.

Why do folk react against this teaching?

It's not just that God is judging people and rejecting some.

Many find that hard,

but this goes one step further.

Here God is actually hardening some

so that they will be rejected.

How is that fair?

What we need to understand is that God is sovereign
and people are responsible.

Both are true at the same time.

These people who saw the miracles of Jesus
and would not believe in him.

They are absolutely 100% responsible
for wilfully rejecting their Saviour.

And at the same time

God is absolutely 100% sovereign over the situation,

so that it can be said that he hardened their hearts and blinded their eyes.

The Bible always presents both as being true.

In Acts 4 it's talking about those who killed Jesus.

It says that they did,

"What God's power and will had decided beforehand should happen."

Are they responsible for those actions?

Will they be judged for those actions?

You bet they are responsible.

You bet they will be judged.

And yet they did what God has already decided would happen.

Is it fair?

Yes it is because people are morally responsible for their choices.

Is God sovereign?

Yes he is.

Otherwise he would not be all powerful and all knowing.

What is the pastoral value of this teaching?

1. It keeps us who are Christians humble.

We must never think that we earned our salvation.

It depends entirely on God's mercy.

2. It gives us hearts of compassion for the lost.

You might think,

'They are stupid.

How come they can't see the truth about Jesus that I can see?'

But their eyes are blinded.

It's not stupidity,

it's spiritual blindness.

God has to take the blinkers from off their eyes.

3. It saves us from having a guilt trip when people don't respond.

When we tell people the gospel and they don't respond,

it's easy to feel like a failure.

Was there something wrong with the way I presented the message?

But it may just be that God has not yet soften their hearts.

There are those who will not believe,

whose hearts are hardened.

And then there are those who have a form of faith

but it's not saving faith.

And to be frank, this is even more scary.

We're in verses 42-43.

"Yet at the same time,

many even among the leaders believed in him.

But because of the Pharisees

they would not openly acknowledge their faith

for fear they would be put out of the synagogue;

for they loved human praise more than the praise that comes from God."

In what sense did these guys believe?

Well they believed that the miracles were true.

But they would not count the cost of following Jesus.

If it came to a choice between Jesus and their place in society,
they would choose their place in society every time.

Let's be clear.

These are not flawed believers.

These are non believers.

Non believers at least in the sense that they are not saved.

When John says,

"They loved human praise more than praise from God,"
that's what he's telling you.

If they don't love praise from God,
they are not saved.

Being a follower of Jesus

is not just about acknowledging something in your head.

It's about counting the cost and deciding to follow him.

Jesus said,

"If anyone wants to be my disciple,
they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me."

The cross for these people was being willing
to renounce their place in the synagogue.

Lots of people say to me,

"I think such and such a person believes,
they just aren't practicing their faith."

Well if they believe,

that kind of belief is not saving faith.

Jesus doesn't know about a faith that is not practiced.

Now I'm not commenting about secret believers in Muslim lands,

who don't reveal themselves because they know they would be killed.

Do they love human praise more than the praise that comes from God?

That would be a big call.

Only God can see their hearts.

But my suspicion is that many of those hearts

genuinely love and serve the Saviour.

And there are other ways they carry their cross.

But in our own country,
those who say they are believers but not practicing.
That's pretty much telling you
they love human praise more than the praise that comes from God.

So we've had the people who wouldn't believe in Jesus -
those whose hearts were hardened.
We've had the people who do believe in Jesus but won't follow him.
Now we get to the true believers.
What does Jesus have to say about true believers?

Well there are two things.
The first is if you believe in Jesus, you are believing in God the Father.
If you look to Jesus, you are looking to God the Father.
I guess for most Christians,
the Lord Jesus is the cuddly face of God.
God the Father seems more distant and perhaps authoritarian.
Jesus says,
When you look at him, you are looking at the Father.
If Jesus loved the poor and the outcast,
that is what God the Father does too.
If Jesus was gracious towards repentant sinners and welcomed them
then God the Father does too.
And if you are worried when you follow Jesus,
that there might be something else God expects of you,
calm your troubled heart.
The Father credits love for Jesus as love for him.
If you are looking to Jesus,
you are looking to the Father.

The second thing,
Jesus has come into the world to be a light,
so that no one who believes in him should stay in darkness.
Much and all as I like having a torch in my phone,
I can go into the shed after dark and see where things are.
That's just a picture of the blessing of not being in spiritual darkness.

Spiritual darkness comes from the things that would keep you captive and lead you away from God's love in Jesus.

That darkness can take many forms,
from addictions to drugs, sex or gambling,
to living for pleasure and mindless entertainment.

Jesus came into the world
so that those who follow him can escape the darkness.

Often we focus on what a privilege it is
to be given the gift of eternal life.

That is after all the great blessing that Jesus promises.

But aren't you glad that right now
you are not enslaved by the darkness
that has captured so many lost souls?

Would you want to be sitting in the Hastings Footy Club
pushing buttons on a pokie machine for 6 hours a day,
while flashing lights kept you transfixed?

Would you want to be numbing the pain in your life
with ever increasing amounts of alcohol until it finally killed you?
Isn't it great to live in the light of Jesus?

Jesus has held out to us the blessing of being a follower.
But he finishes with a warning for those who ignore him.
It starts off sounding very post modern and tolerant.

"If anyone hears my words but does not keep them,
I do not judge that person.

For I did not come to judge the world,
but to save the world."

He sounds like he would fit right in
to a bunch of super tolerant millennials.

But Jesus is not saying there is no judgement for ignoring him,
he's saying that he's not dishing out the judgement right now.

That is not the purpose of his first coming to earth.

There is judgement though.

"There is a judge for the one who rejects me
and does not accept my words;"

Who might that judge be?

Is it God the Father conforming to our authoritarian stereotype?

No it isn't.

At least not in the first instance.

"The very words I have spoken will condemn them at the last day."

Jesus' words will condemn the guilty.

Not when he spoke them,

but on the last day.

"For God so loved the world

that he gave his one and only Son,

that whoever believes in him shall not perish

but have eternal life?"

Those are Jesus' words.

And here is the question on the last day.

Did you believe in Jesus?

Not believe in Jesus like the Pharisees in today's reading.

Those who loved human praise more than praise from God.

But believe in Jesus and count the cost and follow him.

Did you do that?

Because if you did,

you have eternal life.

You have that life now.

It will transform you and break the power of spiritual darkness.

But if you didn't,

then Jesus doesn't need to condemn you.

the words he spoke so long ago will do their work.

They are powerful words.

Words straight from God the Father.

Let's praise God that those words are alive and at work in our lives.

Let's pray for those we know

who as yet have not responded to Jesus' words.