

Key idea: 'Who is Jesus?' is the key question posed by John and the answer lies in 'what you have seen and heard' – in Jesus' words and deeds. This must cause us to think through our reaction – just as Jesus pushed his listeners to in that moment.

1. Who is this?

When Steven Smith returned to top-flight Test cricket in August 2019, he promptly hit innings of 144, 142, 92, 211. That is an astounding 589 runs, averaging 147.25. Based on what Smith was doing – the public evidence on the record – many started to ask, 'Is this finally the next Don Bradman?'. In fact, ABC Grandstand had a discussion panel in September 2019, which included another man who had worn that label ('the next Don Bradman'), Greg Chappell.

That's the problem with cricket – we are always looking for the 'next Don Bradman'. It is the problem across all sports. Someone appears. We ask, 'Who is this man or woman?' We look at their deeds. Then we ask, 'Could this be...?'

I don't want to dwell on the question of the next sporting superstar. But this whole scenario does raise for us a very clear pattern of getting to know someone – you look at their deeds. Identity and what someone does are so closely tied. What someone does, and what someone says, establishes who they are.

Matthew has spent a lot of time showing us Jesus at work. We have seen so much of what he has done – his preaching ('change your view on the world because God has sent his king'), his teaching ('everything that God promised to do in dealing with the cause of

this broken world – and this broken world – is here in me'), and his healing (a leper, a servant, demons dealt with, bleeding, sins and paralysis, death and blindness). We have seen how this sets up the truth about his identity – he comes to bring the outsider in, to reach down to bring up the downtrodden, he is the good Doctor, the Lord, 'God-in-the-flesh'. Matthew has set up this connection so clearly for us, as readers.

And now, as he sends his closest twelve followers out to start declaring this to God's people, the identity of Jesus is placed in front of us. There remain questions. There remain conundrums. There is opposition rising. And it is all connected to this question of Jesus, 'Who are you?'

PRAY...

2. 'Who are you?' (vs.1-15)

Jesus has finished commanding his twelve apostles about their work. I presume they have gone off. Jesus continues to do what he has been doing – look at verse 1: teaching and preaching.

His message is a clear one – **remember Matthew 4:17? READ...**

Jesus' message is about a truth – something is taking place that is changing the whole nature of the world. 'God's kingdom' has come. God is doing, in Jesus, what he promised to do: to roll back sin (the universal human attitude and action that says, 'I am God and God is not') and its effects, and replace it with the approval of God ('blessing'). It is the overthrow of the human endeavour to be God, and the installation of God's king.

Jesus' message demands a reaction – 'repent'. Now, this is a very simple world that means 'change your understanding of reality'. There is a whole new world order that Jesus has come to institute, and all humans have got to work out what to do with it.

Jesus is at the heart of this fundamental change.

But someone is puzzled – **look at verses 2-3... READ.**

The last time we had seen John he was wandering in the desert of Judea. He was preaching. He was preaching in preparation – he was getting people ready for the coming of Jesus. In essence, he was preaching the exact same message as Jesus: 'Get yourselves ready! Reality is about to change! Get organised, because God's king is coming into the world'. And he encouraged people to be baptised, to show that they were getting ready.

This was amazing. People flocked to see John because he was like nothing they had seen before. They had heard about blokes like him – they were called 'prophets', men and women who were prickly, proclaiming God's word to God's people, calling them back to God. After a long period of no speaking (about 400 years), God's people were jolted by the appearance of John. And they all flocked out to see him, like some circus freakshow.

But John didn't mince his words. He spoke a message that was confronting – **listen to Matthew 4:11-12... READ.**

What a message! God's king is coming, and he will deal with all of human sin. It will be confronting! It will be clear! It will be final!

And when Jesus turned up to be baptised by his cousin (John and Jesus were relatives), John recognised him – he recognised that Jesus was the ‘coming one’ that John had been preparing for...

Now, John is in jail (it happens when you confront immorality and corruption). And John is puzzled. **Look again at verse 2...** he has heard of Jesus’ works – the healing, the preaching and teaching, all in the hill-country around Capernaum, a small triangle of around ten square kilometres. There is a disconnect here for John... ‘If Jesus is ‘the coming one’, the one I spent so much time preparing for, the one who will come in confronting and immovable judgement, dealing with sin and our Roman occupiers (because they are part of the problem), then why is he healing hillbillies so far from the political capital of Israel?’

I suspect this might have been what John was thinking. And, in his confusion, he is starting to wonder whether Jesus is the one he was getting people ready for. And there might be someone else... So he sends his close followers to ask the question of Jesus, ‘Who are you?’

Jesus’ response is very clear – **look at verses 4-6... READ.**

Jesus’ answer is a paraphrase and combination of two Old Testament descriptions of what the world will look like when God himself comes to take his people to be with him. Taken from Isaiah 35:5 and 61:1, they describe a world where everything has been put right, as God intended. They describe a world where sin has been dealt with and God’s approval has been bestowed upon the world – just as God promised. The meaning is clear, and would

have been clear to John: look at what Jesus is doing and what Jesus is saying: God himself has come to do as he promised. God himself has come to bear and set right the burdens of his broken world.

It is a remarkable statement of identity about Jesus, by Jesus. And it is borne up by everything we have seen him do and heard him say. It is not separate from reality but rooted, anchored, in the very real world that we live in. It invites John – and us – to look at and examine real people, really set right. It invites John – and us – to listen to real words, really spoken. Jesus is everything that God promised to do (REPEAT).

That is the evidence for John from what Jesus has said and done.

But, as the crowd listens, and as the followers of John return to him with this comprehensive statement, Jesus turns to the crowd and addresses them. In this sense, I suspect that he is dealing with us.

Look at verses 7-10... READ.

Jesus is speaking about John to the crowd. But, I think he is using John's work as a springboard to force the crowd to face the reality of Jesus' identity, right in front of them.

John was not a freak show. John was not a mouthpiece for hire, someone blown about by the winds of public opinion, a man speaking a message of revolution because people wanted change. John was not a 'yes-man', at the beck and call of those with power.

John was a prophet – a mouthpiece for God. He was commissioned to get people ready. And Jesus quotes from another prophet in a remarkable way to make his point.

Malachi had been a prophet. The last in our Old Testament, he had stated clearly, in Malachi 3, that God would send a messenger to get people ready for the coming of God himself to do as he promised, to deal with sin and this broken world. But Jesus changes the quote slightly – he changes a personal pronoun. So, now, as Jesus quotes it, he is saying very clearly that John was preparing for ‘my coming’. Now, my maths isn’t great but I know what an ‘equals’ sign does. And Jesus is saying that ‘God’ in Malachi is equal to ‘Jesus’ in Matthew.

Put simply, Jesus is saying that John has done his job, and God is now standing in front of them (REPEAT).

For a bunch of Jews, standing in Israel, having been brought up on the messages of the prophets, having gawked at John like a circus-act, this is a smack in the face. This no freakshow – this is a fundamental change in reality: God himself is standing in front of you, doing exactly as he promised.

This is a remarkable revelation of Jesus’ identity. God himself is here – Jesus is God – and God is doing exactly as he promised.

In fact, that is what Jesus reminds the crowd of in **verses 11-14... READ.**

There is a lot in this statement by Jesus – everything from the nature of the kingdom of God through to the nature of prophecy. But this much is clear – the era of John has finished, and the greater time is here. Put simply, everything that John was preparing people for has come in the person of Jesus. The time of preparation has finished and the time of fulfilment has come.

But that is not welcome news, is it?

Look at what has happened to John. Look at the rising opposition to Jesus. Look at the accusations and slurs being thrown his way. The coming of Jesus has created conflict and opposition because no human likes their own kingdom being exposed for what it is!

Jesus wants those listening to pay careful attention to what he is saying. This is not just a matter of listening but of hearing – of paying careful and considered attention to what is happening in their midst.

It is a useful reminder, as Jesus moves on to consider the reactions of people to John and Jesus, to consider how we pay attention to Jesus.

John's question raises the issue for us of how we understand Jesus' identity – who Jesus is. Many just dismiss him outright – a fantasy, or a figment – but that is just to deny the physical reality of history. Some accept him in a reduced way – as a good teacher and a misguided teacher and as a martyr. But that it is to reduce him to nothing because none of those identities bring any solution to our need or problem. Some accept him, but they are

disappointed that he doesn't give them what they thought he should – like John. But that is to accept him, and define him, in our terms, not his terms.

Instead, we need to accept his identity as it is revealed in what he has done and said. That is reasonable, fair, and right.

And, if Jesus who he says he is – and there is no reason to doubt it – then this moment – the life and death and resurrection of Jesus – is THE turning point of all history. Put simply, Jesus IS what God promised – the rolling back of sin and the bringing of restoration to a world, and people, broken by our efforts to be God. Put simply, Jesus IS God himself, come in the flesh.

That changes all reality – it changes everything from how I consider Weet-Bix in my plate to how I educate my children through to my consideration of the Black Lives Matter protests and the significance of world politics and the list could go on. It changes personal relationships, community relationships, and everything in between. It changes how we view economics and work and rest.

Whether we respond by repentance – as Jesus exhorts us to – or by apathy, anger, dismissal and suspicion, it doesn't change the basic fact: Jesus is real, and reality changes because of him.

3. 'this generation'... (vs.16-24)

And so, Jesus turns to those in front of him, to confront them about how they have responded to his identity – **look at verses 16-19... READ.**

Jesus couldn't have been any clearer about who he is. But what have this generation done with that?

The image Jesus uses is brutally sharp. He compares this generation to a bunch of petulant children who refuse to play because they don't like the game. John came, proclaiming a message of repentance in preparation for God himself to come – and they didn't like it. Jesus came as God, offering to bind people up and make them whole again – and they didn't like it.

The truth is seen in their actions – and their rejection of Jesus. But this is not a game, is it? This is not a matter of people being petulant and Jesus being dismissed. The stakes here are higher than a children's game – the stakes here are eternal.

Jesus makes that clear as he makes a public statement about how people deal with him, his identity, based on what he has said and done – **look at verses 20-24... READ.**

Jesus is so clear in what he says. He has come with a very clear message: what God has promised is now here – we must adjust our lives in response to this reality, this new reality. To fail to do so is to ignore the truth of Jesus – it is to refuse to repent, and if we reject Jesus, then we will be left to our own devices. In fact, now that we have heard this truth about Jesus, now his true identity has been laid before us, then we are culpable for what we have done with this reality.

Comparing the fate of three towns he has worked in – and been rejected in – to three towns that had reputations for gross

immorality (and one which was destroyed because of its gross immorality), Jesus makes a very clear point: to reject Jesus, to refuse to accept him as he really is, is to face a worse destruction. To reject Jesus is to be rejected by God.

4. Who are you?

Matthew wants us to deal with who Jesus truly is – he is not the next-to Saviour of the world, nor is he someone preparing the way for someone else. He is the endpoint of what God promised: the commitment to deal with how we have broken the world, and ourselves, through sin. Jesus is God himself come to deal with our sin, and us. Jesus is God himself come in compassion to bind us, make us whole, bring us back to what we were designed to be.

For those who are dealing with Jesus, those wondering who he is and what he is on about, there is a wonderful reassurance in looking at what he does and says – because it reveals who he truly is: the Lord who has come to deal with our greatest need and bind us up, and make us whole again. If you are like John and wondering if he is who he says he is, if you are wondering whether Jesus is the one who can deal with the broken state of the world, there is great reassurance here: God has sent Jesus to make us whole again – and his deeds speak to the truth of this. Do not be shaken in this truth!

For those wondering about the state of God's commitment and promises, there is a statement of completeness here: God has done exactly as he promised and said he would. The preparations have been done, God has done exactly as he has said. Jesus is THE point of all God's promises and plans. That means that there

is nothing more than Jesus (and nothing less). That means that in Jesus alone – who he is and what he does – is the complete answer to our sins and brokenness. That means that Jesus is enough – we need no more!

But, there is also a warning here, or a number of warnings here:

- Reality has changed, at and in Jesus. And we must deal with that.
- Jesus is revealed very clearly in what he says and does. And we must deal with that.
- To reject Jesus is to reject God, and to accept that you will face life, death and judgement on your own. There is no way that you can reject Jesus now and then expect God not to reject you at death. There is no way you can reject Jesus now, and expect heaven in death.

The warning here is very clear: Jesus is who he says he is – just look at his words and deeds. We must work out our response. And the consequences are massive!