

The Authentic Jesus

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Date: 14 February 2016

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[0 : 00] When I was a student, I landed a job in the summer at Buckingham Palace in London because they open it to the public in the summer, so they just want students who've got the summer off to come and show people around and answer questions, pretend to be experts.

One late afternoon, the number of people coming in to the staterooms really went down. Hardly anyone was coming in. And then this beautiful, glamorous woman came in wearing sunglasses alongside this very well-built man, and they came down the picture gallery.

I was in this room off the picture gallery, and I saw this woman come down, quite noticeable. And she stopped in the room I was in, and she asked me some questions, and we talked for a few minutes, and I told her all about this grandfather clock.

And she listened, and she sort of smiled and said thank you and left. And as she was leaving, her and this guy turned around and looked at me, a bit surprised. But she was off. Then my boss came in and said, so did you see Julia Roberts?

And I hadn't realised that it was her. And I had this big chat with her, and I think she sort of looked surprised that I hadn't sort of just collapsed in recognition of who she was.

[1 : 13] And that summer, she was in London filming the film Notting Hill, which was this rom-com all about a Hollywood actress, who's basically her, meeting an ordinary London guy and them having this romance.

And so afterwards, I felt like I'd missed my sort of Notting Hill opportunity, which makes me think that it was probably best that I didn't recognise her. Otherwise, I would probably have, you know, asked her out for a drink or something really stupid, thinking I was Hugh Grant.

But thankfully, I didn't recognise her. What we're looking at this morning is potentially a much more serious risk of mistaken identity about Jesus of Nazareth.

But not through him kind of walking in the room and us kind of not realising, oh, we've missed him. We didn't see it was him. Our problem with Jesus is that we have a picture in our minds of who Jesus is, what kind of man he was.

And it's different to the authentic Jesus, the Jesus who actually walked on earth 2,000 years ago. So we're going back to Galilee. We're seeing him through Matthew's eyes in this series, in Matthew's Gospel, to confront our own mistakes of who Jesus is.

[2 : 24] Some people think he's just Jesus, the legend, that there was a good man, a dynamic, incredible man, but that Matthew's accounts, like the other accounts, were written later and by then he'd become a legend.

And that just doesn't work because scholars are placing Matthew's Gospel and the other Gospels earlier and earlier now in terms of when they were written.

We can be fairly certain that, I'm absolutely certain really, that Matthew's Gospel was written within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses of Jesus. And you can't make up a legend about somebody when the eyewitnesses are still alive because they can say, that didn't happen.

So it doesn't work that Jesus was a legend. Other people think Jesus came to found another world religion, the Jesus of churchianity. So the reason we're attracted to that picture of Jesus, the Jesus of churchianity, is that we start to confine him to a set of rituals and think, well, I don't have to take obeying him too seriously.

As long as I have been baptised and I go to church now and again and I have bread and wine and I observe certain rituals that allow me to keep Jesus at a distance in terms of the requirement to obey him.

[3 : 47] Perhaps we start thinking of Jesus instead as the all-affirming counsellor and friend. He loves me just the way I am. He's come to help me to learn to love myself.

He doesn't want me to change. He never disagrees with me. Perhaps we drift into thinking of him like that. Well, whatever we're influenced by when it comes to his identity, what we have to do again and again is have an encounter with the authentic Jesus.

So we've got three scenes this morning in which to do that. In them we find it's shocking how much the real Jesus expects of us. But it's astonishing how much we can expect of him.

So in the first scene, the wanderer calls for wholehearted followers. Jesus meets two men here who misunderstand what Jesus is calling people to.

The first one is too quick to promise. The second is too slow to perform. So let's take the first one from verse 18. Have a look at verse 18. When Jesus saw the crowd around him, he gave orders to cross to the other side of the lake.

[4 : 55] Then a teacher of the law came to him and said, Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go. Jesus replied, foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests.

But the son of man has nowhere to lay his head. When the explorer Ernest Shackleton was recruiting for his Antarctic expedition, he put an advert in the newspaper, we should have it on the screen, saying this.

Men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return, doubtful, honour and recognition in case of success.

Well, I don't know how many people applied to that first advert, but it doesn't sound very attractive because it's so honest about what he was calling people to. Well, Jesus is very honest about what it would look like to become one of his followers.

From that moment on, you stop saying, My will be done for your life, and you start saying to Jesus, Thy will be done. And Jesus gives a specific example to this man here in that time and context.

[6 : 06] He calls himself the son of man. And he says the son of man has come on a mission that requires him to wander from village to village because people need to hear the news that they can come to him and be made right with God.

He will be homeless. So we see foxes around, and I've seen a few of them around this woodland area, especially when I'm coming into St. Silas in the evening, the urban fox. And it's a hard life being an urban fox, fending for themselves, going through the bins, on the scrounge.

But at least they have a hole to rest in at night. Birds have to fly for miles every day in search of food.

Literally miles they fly. But at least they have nests to go back to and retreat. Well, not so for the followers of Jesus, who need to come with him as he spreads the good news about his kingdom far and wide.

It's a challenging statement for us. Our time is different. And yet, nonetheless, following Jesus is very costly. I remember somebody talking to me when I was still working as a lawyer about the potential costs, should I choose to go into full-time paid ministry.

[7 : 17] And he talked about the financial hit. And he talked about the fact we might need to move around to different places that we wouldn't have chosen to live. And it will be hard work.

And that you often get a lot of flack from people who are not Christians and from the church you're working in. And then he said to me, The thing is, you don't make that decision now when you decide whether or not to go into ministry, whether you're willing to accept that.

You made that decision when you decided to become a Christian. See, for all of us, when you decide to become a Christian, you decide to come under the rule of the Lord Jesus and to spend your life no longer for your own comfort, but to seek his glory, to seek to make him known as the person you are with the gifts God's given you.

And of course, for lots of us, that won't mean being a paid minister in a church. But for all of us, that will mean a costly decision. We need to ask ourselves, what are you prepared to do?

There are still lots of people groups in the world today where people have never heard about Jesus and his kingdom. They're born, they live, they die. They never hear about Jesus.

[8 : 33] So we need to ask, will I go? And tell those people. And if you think that it's best for you to stay as the person you are, will you pray for others who go?

And will you pay for others to go? If you think about our own city, about Glasgow, I'm almost speechless trying to describe the need for people to come to Jesus in Glasgow.

And for us to make him known here, will require us not to look increasingly like everyone else, but to live radically distinctive lives from the people around us, so that they're drawn in and see, this is

different, and they want to hear about whom we follow.

So for some of us, as time goes on, you know, many people here are in professional jobs. As time goes on, as a Christian in a professional job, I take it that our lives have to look more and more different from our peers, because they're living for their own comfort, and their lives will look more and more comfortable if they play that right.

And our lives are not for our own comfort anymore. They're about making Jesus known and his honour. So what will you be prepared to do for him? Well, this man, who had said to Jesus, I'll follow you, he just hadn't weighed it up properly.

[9 : 50] And so Jesus kindly, lovingly, sends him away to reflect on it. He'd been too quick to promise. The second man, though, is too slow to perform.

Just have a look at verse 21. Another disciple said to him, Lord, first let me go and bury my father. But Jesus told him, follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.

Well, people disagree here about what Jesus means. What's clear, though, is that the man isn't willing to put Jesus first. He's putting his family obligations first, overcoming to Jesus.

It might be that literally his dad's died, and the funeral's coming up, and Jesus is saying, perhaps for hyperbole, you can't go. I think it's more likely that this phrase, let me go and bury my father, was a phrase being used at the time when your dad was still alive.

If you had family obligations, perhaps you're on a farm with your father, and the son was expected to kind of see their father out, to look after the farm and the estate, until their father died, and they inherited, and then they were free from that kind of obligation.

[11 : 03] So, Jesus' words, even if that's what he means, the man saying, I want to stay with my father till he dies, even so, they're very challenging words, aren't they? It's not that Jesus undervalues family.

He rebukes the religious leaders for their failure to look after their own parents. But Jesus' point is, you have to put Jesus first now. You can't have conditions when you come to him.

Your obligations to everyone and everything else come second to him, even those to your own family. And did you notice the play on words that Jesus used when he spoke to the man?

He said, let the dead bury their own dead. It might sound very costly to come to him, but until you come to him, you are spiritually dead. When you come to Jesus, he gives you spiritual life, knowing God through him.

And any of us who hasn't done that yet could do that today. Jesus urges you not to do it lightly. You must weigh up the cost first. But he also urges you, don't delay.

[12 : 07] In putting me first. Don't let anything, even something really important, like your parents or your partner and how they would react, don't let anything hold you back from following Jesus wholeheartedly.

So the authentic Jesus demands that we're wholehearted in following him. We're up the cost, put him first. And in our second and third encounters with him this morning, we see why that's so worth it.

Now, key to Matthew's claim here, as we read on, we've already had the Bible reading, is that Jesus demonstrated miraculous power. And I just wanted to spend a moment on that.

Perhaps, if you're here visiting, you might be struggling to believe that. And obviously, that's a big topic. I'd love to talk to you more about it. But for now, let me just say that, above all, it's not a question of evidence, generally, when we're weighing up, did Jesus perform miracles?

It's usually not about evidence. It's a question of worldview. You see, miracles are only impossible if there's no God. If you've made up your mind already that there can't be a God, then this universe is just a closed system of cause and effect.

[13 : 20] And of course, however strong the evidence is of a miracle, you're not going to accept it, because it's impossible. But the thing is, I just urge you to reconsider if that's currently your thinking about God, because we can't prove or disprove that there's a God.

We can't prove it or disprove it. So, if you're thinking there isn't a God, then that is a position of faith. And it might be wrong. Just suppose for a moment that there is a God.

What if he really did step into our world to make himself known to us? What might we expect him to do to prove that he really was God? Wouldn't we expect him to mark his arrival into the world by doing things that only God can do?

That's exactly what we find here. And we need to be careful not to rule out the evidence, because we've already made up our own minds. So let's turn to this scene on the lake.

It's our second point. The storm calmer calls for a new kind of faith. You see, if the disciples had seen that encounter with these two men and they're left wondering, gosh, is it really worth it to follow Jesus? They don't have to wait long to find out, do they?

[14:30] In verse 23, then Jesus got into the boat and his disciples followed him. Without warning, a furious storm came upon the lake, so that the waves swept over the boat, but Jesus was sleeping.

Now, the Sea of Galilee is more than 200 meters below sea level. what happens is the hot air rises and it pulls in these powerful, violent winds that rush over the water and they churn it up into huge waves.

Now, Jesus' disciples, the Sea of Galilee, was their office. They were seasoned fishermen, and yet what happened that night terrified them. One of our problems, looking back at this, living in Glasgow, is that we don't appreciate anymore how dangerous that would have felt, unless we've been on a boat really scared that it was going to sink.

And I was trying to think of an illustration of that to help us this week, kind of put ourselves into their shoes. And just on Friday, I don't know whether you saw this, but a video went viral of a boat just out on the North Sea during Storm Gertrude just last week.

So I just got a clip for us to see of that. And I want us to think, how would this have felt when nature is your enemy like this? Really full on. Well that was a big boat.

[15:53] These guys were in a first century craft, out fishing at night. Just imagine how they would have felt as they thought they were going to drown.

Too far from the shore to do anything about it. Feeling this boat creaking, perhaps losing cargo over the side of it. And they thought their number was up that night. So even today, I saw on the BBC News that if you're a fisherman in Britain today, there's a 1 in 20 chance that you will die on the job during your career.

At that time it was far worse in these small boats. Just picture the men and picture the fear in their eyes. Have a look at verse 25. The disciples went and woke him saying, Lord, save us.

We're going to drown. He replied, You of little faith, why are you so afraid? Then he got up and rebuked the winds and the waves and it was completely calm.

So the boat's being tossed everywhere. They're getting thrown up and down. Jesus gets up and he speaks to the wind and the waves. There must have been a moment when that was absolutely baffling.

[17:09] If you're on that boat. In Scotland, what I'm learning a month into my time here, or nearly two months, is you guys know about real weather, don't you here? Since we moved here, I've been amazed.

There is an aggression to the weather in Glasgow. I've cycled to St. Silas in sheets of rain and strong wind, but it's never occurred to me to stop at a red light with other cyclists around and say, it's okay guys, quiet, be still.

I haven't done that yet. And yet the wind and the waves here, they recognize Jesus' voice. Nature obeys him.

And on the boat, the disciples reacted, just as I would have reacted. These aren't gullible men.

Verse 27, wouldn't we have reacted like this? the men were amazed and asked, what kind of man is this?

Even the winds and the waves obey him. Here's the problem for the disciples. The Bible has already told them that it's God who controls the wind and the waves.

[18:16] He made them, he controls them. Here is a man who can rebuke nature. And then Jesus rebukes them. Did you notice that? Why does he rebuke them? Not because they woke him up.

He tells them off for having been afraid. As soon as they cried, Lord, save us, they shouldn't have been afraid anymore. And Jesus offers us that same kind of salvation today.

A salvation that should drive out our fear. The biggest problem that we all face, that every human being faces, is that the storm of God's judgment is coming against the way we treated him.

And Jesus offers us a cast iron guarantee. You say, Lord, save me. And he guarantees us that God will not condemn us when the storm of his judgment comes.

And so if we are afraid as Christians, there's a sense in which we're not trusting Jesus enough. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, but we know that our biggest problem is being dealt with by

Jesus, and we can trust him and not be afraid.

[19 : 18] So that's our second point, that Jesus, the storm karma, calls for fearless faith. Let's move on to our third encounter with Jesus. The demon crusher calls for kingdom priorities.

Jesus goes to a new area, doesn't he, in verse 28. When he arrived at the other side, in the region of the Gadarenes, two demon possessed men coming up from the tombs met him.

They were so violent that no one could pass that way. What do you want with us, son of God? they shouted. Have you come here to torture us before the appointed time?

Let's just pause there for a moment. Have you noticed how remarkable it is what these demons say? We've had the witness that Jesus is who he claims to be from the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, but now here are evil spirits calling Jesus the Son of God.

Now this display of demonic power, it might not be something that Matthew distinguishes demon possession from mental illness elsewhere in his gospel.

[20 : 27] I think we do get demonic power at work today in people, but it does look to me as though when Jesus came at the center point of human history, just as there was an increase in angelic activity surrounding for example his birth, there was also an increase in demonic activity.

And here the demons have taken control of these two men and they are destroying them. That's what evil does. It promises you life and it takes control of you and it destroys you.

Now with 24 hour news channels today, we're no strangers to the fact that there is evil in this world, are we? The stories from people who've managed to escape from the Islamic state and its brutality or the revelations this week about poor Millie Dowler's last 24 hours leave us in no doubt about that.

There is evil in our world and we're naive to think otherwise, to think that humanity is essentially good and there's nothing to be afraid of. And the Bible makes sense of what we see on the news because it warns us that evil is real, it's spiritual, it's personal, and it is a horrible, destructive, overpowering thing.

And so what wonderful news that Jesus is more powerful than evil spirits. The demons here know that one day he will destroy them.

[21 : 42] Did you notice that? They ask him, they don't know why Jesus is there, but they say, have you come here to torture us before the appointed time? The appointed time.

The reason we still have natural disasters and tsunamis and shipwrecks today, the reason we still have evil and war and crime today, is that the appointed time hasn't yet come.

But it will come. It's going to come. And what a day that will be. Just look at the control that Jesus demonstrates in verse 30. Some distance from them, a large herd of pigs was feeding.

The demons begged Jesus, if you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs. He said to them, go. So they came out and went into the pigs and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water.

Jesus liberates the men from a slavery that has consumed them. He has a power that's stronger than evil. He delivers them from an evil they couldn't escape themselves.

[22 : 48] But now look at the reaction of the people in the Gentile town. Those tending the pigs ran off, went into the town and reported all this, including what had happened to the demon possessed men.

Then the whole town went out to meet Jesus and when they saw him, they pleaded with him to leave their region. So I could just imagine them, they're passing on the news to each other, those two men that meant we couldn't go down that road for years because we're so scared, they've been released from their slavery to demons by this man who's arrived on a boat and they all get out of their houses and out of the local pub and they march up the road and they get into this graveyard and they beg Jesus to stay forever because they've got other evil in their village and they want him to get rid of all of that as well and they want him to transform them.

No, they don't do that. They beg Jesus to go away. Why? It's because they care more about pigs than people.

They care more about financial security than about the transformation of a life. And those priorities look crazy, don't they? But they're exactly the same priorities in Glasgow today.

we are products of a culture that worships economic prosperity. And so we need to ask ourselves, does that hold us back from letting Jesus rule our lives wholeheartedly?

[24 : 19] Are we in danger of missing out on enjoying the liberating, rescuing power of Jesus because we're simply too caught up by the business of a daily life that we complain is too busy all

the time but actually is all designed ultimately around making more money?

Well these people wanted Jesus to stay away because otherwise they'd be less comfortable. Three encounters with the real Jesus. And as we finish I just want to urge you to reflect on how much we need the real Jesus today.

In Britain, in Scotland, we hear again and again, especially among young adults, that we are facing a crisis of hope in our culture. People are cynical about the future and they feel stitched up by life. And three factors converge together to mean that people today lack hope. The first is there seems to be nothing to live for. There's no meaning to our lives. There's no point to it all.

I remember a friend from university saying to me, I'm just really scared that deep down we're no different from ants scurrying across a warm rock. There's no purpose. The second reason people lack hope is there's too much suffering, too much sickness, too many tragedies.

[25 : 33] And thirdly, there's too much evil. People do the most horrible things to each other, even to children. Well, consider how Jesus can be your hope in a world struggling to find any.

If you feel you have nothing to live for, our first encounter showed us that Jesus wants to pick you up and send you on an incredible adventure for him that will cost you everything but gives you real life.

If you feel that there's too much suffering in the world, then remember that Jesus calmed a storm with words to point us to the future day he will bring when he'll put the world right and nature will become our friend and not our enemy anymore.

And if you feel distressed by the evil in our world today, then picture Jesus in that graveyard, in compassion, driving out those demons, and remember that he is the one who can free us from evil and protect us from evil and who will one day crush evil, forever.

That's the real Jesus. So accept his invitation afresh and turn wholeheartedly to him. Let's have a moment of quiet and then I'll leave us in a prayer.

[26 : 44] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Lord Jesus, we praise you for who and your authority, your power over sickness and suffering, even over nature itself, your power over evil and its threats to us.

so by your spirit we pray that you will impress this on our hearts that we will be wholehearted in following you fearless in our faith and our priorities will always be to accept you whatever the cost we pray these things in your name Amen