

Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison, St Peter's church, 14th January 2018

Epiphany 2: How did people react to Jesus, and how do they do so today?

How did people react to Jesus? His actions, his words, his life, were all very controversial; to what extent can we tell, through the pages of Scripture, how people responded to him?

The reactions that people had to Jesus fall into several categories. Let's look further.

- Let's start with a man who appears in this morning's Gospel: Nathaniel. Nathaniel is known for his response, on meeting Jesus, 'What good can come out of Nazareth?' We can see him, therefore, as a **Sceptic**; he is not sure about Jesus, he is not convinced by him, at least at first. He reminds us of the disciple Thomas, sometimes known as 'doubting Thomas', since he needed to be shown evidence that Jesus had risen from the dead.
- Then there are those who see themselves as **superior** to the people Jesus particularly cared for, and those whom he befriended. An example of these is Simon the Pharisee, who rebuked Jesus for associating with people of lower social class, such as the woman thought to be a prostitute who came to Jesus while he was with Simon (sometimes thought to be Mary Magdalene). Simon didn't really have any time for Jesus' compassion and mercy; he was a man similar to the Pharisee in a parable told by Jesus who compared himself with a tax collector and said, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are: extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the publican, standing afar off, would not so much as lift up his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!'
- Then there were those who were proud of their **power and status, and had a sense of self importance**. These were the people who had a lot to lose as a result of Jesus coming on the scene preaching love, compassion, mercy and forgiveness for all; members of the religious establishment such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees; on occasions they tried to trap Jesus or convict him of blasphemy or of breaking the Jewish religious law. They may have done this in all sincerity, however; their devotion to the law was such that they simply thought he was wrong, and a threat to the true faith.

- Then there were the **apathetic, the uninterested**; those who made excuses for not responding positively to the call of Jesus. Sometimes they said they had their own business to attend to, or their farm, or their family; Jesus referred to such people when he told a parable about people who rejected the invitation to a wedding feast put on by a king.
- Some of those who encountered Jesus were simply **cynical**. Remember the response of Pontius Pilate in the trial of Jesus, who said cynically, ‘What is truth?’ before washing his hands of Jesus and his fate. For Pilate politics were far more important than matters of right and wrong; he is portrayed in the gospels as a man of expediency, pragmatism, keeping the peace, placating the restless; he quite probably would have preferred to be back in Rome rather than in this outpost of the Roman Empire.
- All the attitudes of these people: the sceptic, the superior, the self-important/powerful, the apathetic, the cynic – can be seen as standing in opposition to Christ and all he stood for. They give a flavour of why and how people took issue with Jesus and were not persuaded by him.
- Each of these attitudes, however, has its counterpart:
- **Openness** (cf Scepticism): Consider the first disciples, who responded positively to the call of Jesus, ‘Come and follow me’. They showed a readiness to embrace new thinking and new possibilities. Recall also the joy and delight of Mary Magdalene and the other women on learning, at the empty tomb, that Jesus had risen from the dead.
- **Humility** (cf Superiority): There are many examples of humility in the gospels. Think, for example, of Mary, mother of Jesus, in her obedience to God and her acceptance of her God-given responsibility. There was also the woman with the flow of blood came to Jesus for healing in a crowd, not wanting him to know she had touched his robe. Also the Syro Phoenician woman, who pleaded for healing for her daughter, saying that ‘even the dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master’s table’. Then also there was Zacchaeus, who admitted his sins and promised to repay all the money he had extorted from people. Jesus also stressed, in the Sermon on the

Mount, that 'Blessed are the poor in spirit', in other words those who are lowly, humble of heart, those who know their need of God.

- Let's not forget, however, that there were some powerful people who were ready to admit that they needed Jesus; they didn't allow their status or any sense of pride to get in the way. Think, for example, of Jairus, the leader of a synagogue who came to Jesus since his daughter was seriously ill; and the centurion who sought Jesus help for his sick boy/servant' and the rich young man who came to Jesus secretly asking for guidance.
- There were some people who, hearing Jesus and seeing his miracles, were perhaps too **Gullible** (cf **cynic**); Jesus in fact shows frustration that there were some who just looked for miracles without being interested in his teaching and way of life.
- Then there were **those who were ready to make sacrifices** (cf those who just showed apathy): we think of the disciples, both men and women, who left home and family, or who put themselves at risk for the sake of the Gospel.
- We have, then, a series of pairs of attitudes: **Openness/scepticism; humility/superiority; readiness to accept Jesus/self-importance; gullibility/cynicism; readiness to make sacrifices/apathy**. Of course each pair really represents a spectrum; and each pair applies to the attitudes of people today just as much as in Jesus' time.
- The optimum point on the spectrum may vary, however, from attitude to attitude, and sometimes from person to person. For example:
 - Doubt and scepticism can sometimes be valuable, when we think and reflect about matters before deciding what we can accept and what we can't accept. An example of such a person was Nathaniel, mentioned earlier.
 - The opposite of cynicism can be seen as gullibility; but this is not usually to be recommended.
 - Being a person of humility does not mean that we are to be a door mat, trodden on by others; it's important also to maintain one's self-respect.

- It's important to be able to make sacrifices for God, but also to know what is sensible for ourselves and those who may depend upon us; I heard, for example, once of a man who gave his house to the Church but then ended up having nowhere to live.

Where are you, on the spectrum of each of these pairs? Do you need to move along the spectrum in any of them, to be more like those who were receptive to Christ? Where are you perhaps falling short of a real readiness to embrace the message of Christ in all its fullness, and apply it in your life?

We remain in the season of Epiphany, when we reflect upon the revelation of Christ to the world. God reveals himself in Christ; it is then up to us to receive that revelation as fully as we can, to let all that Christ was, is and all that he stands for penetrate deep within us, breaking down all that is hard and self-centred, and making way for a deeper and fuller openness to other people and to the love of God which is infinite, eternal, and more than anything we can ever fully fathom. This is with the hope that that we will become more and more like those people whose lives Jesus touched and who allowed themselves to be transformed by his love, rather than those who resisted, who blocked his love, and who indeed hardened their hearts against him.

Which will your response be?