

2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

What about us grils?

Presented by Margaret Hall

Good morning. Years ago, I heard something that stuck in my mind. It was about someone chalking on a wall in the New York subway, *I love grils*. Someone else had written underneath, *Not grils, stupid - girls*. Someone else had written in response, *What about us grils?*

What about us grils? People for whom the generally-accepted norms - not of spelling, but of life - have not been followed. Perhaps someone who would have loved to marry, but the opportunity never came. The couple who would love to have children, but can't. Someone whose path in life has gone in a direction they wouldn't have chosen - through illness or accident, other people's wrongdoing, or any untoward circumstance. Most people don't enjoy feeling different. It's only human to want to fit in - to be accepted and loved as normal. How can 'grils' feel accepted as they are - and loved?

1

This is 2CH, where we're thinking this morning of people who feel they don't quite fit in.

The accounts of Jesus' life introduce us to a number of people who would have felt different from others. Mary Magdalene, whose life was being torn apart by forces outside her control. Bartimaeus, whose disability had forced him into sitting by the roadside begging. Zacchaeus, whose job as a tax-collector branded him as a traitor in the eyes of his fellow-Jews. All the nameless people the religious leaders categorized as 'sinners'. To many they were social outcasts. But not to Jesus, who sought their company - shared meals with them. Their being different made no difference to him.

Of course being different in itself doesn't have to be a negative. It can be very much a positive. One of those outside the box of what's normal was a relative of Jesus, the son of his mother's cousin. He was the only child of elderly parents. Everyone expected he'd be called after his father, but his parents insisted he be called John, because that's what the angel who'd announced his birth had said his name was to be. From the beginning it was all a bit unusual.

Not surprisingly, John grew up with a sense of having a peculiar destiny - peculiar in the sense of being quite distinct from other people's. As a young man he lived by himself out in the desert, dressed in a garment of camel's hair, surviving on a diet of locusts and wild honey. He went off preaching through all the area round the Jordan River, calling on anyone who'd listen to stop turning their backs on God - to turn *to* him, and mark their turning by being baptized in the river.

There were so many who heeded his call, the religious leaders themselves came down to the Jordan valley to see what was going on. John pulled no punches in telling people how they should be living, including the religious leaders, whom he called 'a brood of vipers'. (That was certainly different!) He said that being descended from Abraham wouldn't guarantee them acceptance by God. Only real repentance that changed the way they lived could do that. Then they would be ready for what God was about to do - appear in his world, as a person, in order to confront evil and save us from it - which is what Isaiah had said he'd do, all those centuries before.

To those who were open to admitting they'd turned away from God, John's preaching hit home. He got people asking, "What shall we do?" His answers were nothing if not practical. "If you have two tunics," he said, "you should share with someone who has none. Share your food as well." Even the tax-collectors asked him what they should do. "Collect only what you're supposed to," he said. He told soldiers to stop making false accusations in order to extort money from people, and be content with their pay.

If we all lived as John said to, what a very different world it would be.

II

You're listening to 2CH, where we're looking at the peculiar life of a man called John.

When the rumours began that John the Baptizer was the long-awaited Messiah - chosen by God to rescue his people - John denied them vigorously. "I'm not the Christ," he told the crowds who flocked to hear him. "Who are you then?" they asked. Quoting from Isaiah, John said, "I'm the voice crying in the wilderness, 'Make way for the Lord!' I'm baptizing with water. But one who's more powerful than I will come. He'll baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

And one day, as John was baptizing people in the river, there he was - coming down the river-bank, to be baptized! John said to him, "You should be baptizing me!" But Jesus said, "Let it be this way for now. It's appropriate to do whatever's right." John's spiritual antenna had identified Jesus as the promised Saviour, but from Jesus' first adult public appearance, he was identifying himself with people who needed to turn back to God. Although *his* baptism had an extra dimension.

Recalling the event, John said, "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven and remain on him. The One who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The One on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain, he's the one who'll baptize with the Holy Spirit.' I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God." John also pointed ahead to Jesus' death as the Lamb that would take away the sin of the world - God himself paying once-for-all the penalty his justice requires.

In pointing out who Jesus is and what he'd come for, John removed himself from the spotlight. If he was tempted to feel sidelined, after all he'd done to bring about a spiritual awakening, it seems he overcame that temptation, by talking about Jesus. He said, "Jesus is the one I meant when I said, 'A man comes after me who has surpassed me, because he was before me.' The reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed. The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less."

And there is the antidote for the feelings of loss *we* may have - to look, not at ourselves, but at Jesus - God himself in human form, come to bring back to himself everyone who accepts his death was for them. He demonstrated on the cross a love for humankind we can totally rely on, so that whoever we are, wherever our path in life may have taken us, however different we may feel ourselves to be, we can know we are accepted, and eternally loved, by God himself.

III

You're listening to 2CH, and this is 7.30 on Sundays.

John the Baptizer was fearless in telling the truth, even to King Herod. Herod had a half-niece called Herodias, who was married to Herod's half-brother. Herod decided to divorce his own wife and marry Herodias. John rebuked him for breaking the law, both civil and moral. So Herod put John in prison.

From prison John sent a message to Jesus which reveals how much he was struggling. Perhaps he was wondering where God was, in the direction his life had taken. He certainly had doubts about who Jesus was. “Are you the Messiah?” he asked, “or should we be looking for someone else?”

Maybe you can relate to the way John must have been feeling. His path in life had been different from the norm. He’d endured years of loneliness and hardship living in the desert. But he’d carried out as best he could the task he’d been called to - to announce that God was about to intervene to put the world to rights - essentially, that good *will* triumph over evil. Now here he was, at the mercy of an evil despot, unlikely to see again the light of day. Had he believed and preached a lie?

We may know in theory that God loves us. We may believe his love became visible in Jesus, whose triumph over death is the sign of the renewed creation that’s to come. But when life turns out differently from what we’d hoped, a tsunami of doubt can rush in, to overwhelm what we’ve believed.

Jesus sent John’s disciples back to him with this message: “The blind are receiving their sight, the lame are walking, those who have leprosy are being cured, the deaf are hearing, the dead are being raised, and the good news is being preached to the poor. Blessed are those who don’t fall away, on account of me.”

God *was* at work through Jesus, to put the forces of evil to flight - and so to signal their final destruction. God *was* on the move to heal a broken world - and John had better believe it. Like us, John was given plenty of evidence (which is not the same as proof), and was then called on to keep trusting God’s word, whatever was happening to him. In fact, he had only a short time left.

Not long after Jesus’ reply to John, King Herod held a feast to celebrate his birthday. Herodias’ daughter was called in to dance before the king’s guests, and her dancing pleased him so much he swore he’d give her whatever she asked, up to half his kingdom. Instructed by her mother Herodias, she asked for John’s head. Herod stuck with his vow, and ordered it to be brought on a platter.

So ended John the Baptizer’s anything-but-normal life in this world, and so began his eternal life sharing in God’s glory.

Conclusion

John the Baptizer’s life was certainly different - strange, hard and lonely. Yet it was a good life, as Jesus testified when he said, “I tell you, among those born of women there’s no one greater than John.” But Jesus also knew that in God’s sight every soul is equally precious, so he added, “Yet the one who’s least in the kingdom of God is greater than John.”

Life might not be what we’d like it to be, but the secret to fulfilling its purpose is trust in God’s promises as Jesus made them known. Such faith will be tested, as John’s was, but the testing will make it stronger, as we keep our focus on Jesus.

An Afro-American janitor was listening to Bible students, discussing the book of *Revelation*’s visions of the way the world is and will be. As the janitor walked off, he was heard to mutter, “All I knows is - Jesus wins.”

Lord Jesus, we trust what you said, we rely on your power, and we rest in your love. Amen