

Too smart for Jesus?

John 7:45-52

When I was in high school,
 if someone gave my friends and me a choice
 between being the top sportsperson in the school,
 and being the top academic achiever in the school,
 I think each one of us would have chosen sporting glory.
 That was the real prize in school.

So you can imagine my surprise when I saw at Chatswood station.
 this billboard advertising an academic coaching college.
 I'm used to seeing sportspeople on billboards, but not academic people.
 So here's Imogen who came 4th in Advanced English,
 1st in Legal Studies, who gained an ATAR of 99.80
 and who can teach you at *Delta Specialist Education*
 Or how about this guy: 1st in English Extension 1 and 2,
 1st in German continuers and German extension
 1st in Latin, 15th in Legal Studies (what happened?), 12th in Modern history.

So in the 20+ years since I've been in school,
 the aspirations we set before our young people have shifted a little.
 These billboards would not have been seen back in the 1990s.
 And it's not a bad thing that the emphasis has shifted to matters of the mind
 because God has made us rational people with brains
 and we ought to develop our minds so that we can bless others
 with clear, accurate and creative thinking.

But perhaps with some people,
 an emphasis on intelligence creates a conflict with Christianity.
 The late Christopher Hitchens once said that "religion (and within that he
 includes Christianity) makes intelligent people say stupid things".
 Stupid things like *Christ was born of a virgin*,
 that *Jesus was raised from the dead*,
 and that *there is a God who will judge humankind for their sins*.
If you're smart, Hitchens would say, then you'll ditch the supernatural beliefs.

This perceived conflict between Christianity and intelligence is as old as the NT itself.
 You may remember Paul's words in 1 Cor 1:21
 God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.
 Christian belief has always been foolish to some,
 and while here in Australia we are learning more and more to value the mind,
 The question as to the compatibility between mind and faith is an old one.
 In fact it predates the Apostle Paul;
 as our reading from John has demonstrated,
 this question goes back to ministry of Jesus himself.

Is belief in Christ a product of feeble minds?
Our passage has something to say about this.

We're in John 7, starting at verse 45.

⁴⁵ Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?" ⁴⁶ "No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards replied. ⁴⁷ "You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. ⁴⁸ "Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him?" ⁴⁹ No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them."

So in these verses we hear the voices of those who are too smart for Jesus.
Why do they have a problem with believing the words of Jesus?
Well, in verse 47-49 I see three claims made by these sceptics,
which seek to justify their own resistance to what Jesus is teaching.

First of all they say that *the content of Jesus' message is deceitful*

After the temple guards returned empty handed the Pharisees get angry
"You mean he has deceived you also?"

It's hard to know whether they're angry at having Jesus slip through the net
or whether they're angry at what they see as Christ's deceptive teaching.
Probably both; they really did think that Jesus spoke lies
and they wanted to silence him.

I don't think that I've met anyone today who says that Jesus was a liar,
but I certainly have met people who think that
the picture we have received about Jesus is lie.

This is what our Muslim friends are convinced of.

They have a great respect for Jesus and believe *some* of the things we believe:
that he was born of a virgin,
that was a prophet from God,
that he will one day return as judge.
But when it comes to what's at the very centre of what we believe
Christ's death and resurrection,
that's something that that Islam thinks *is a lie*.

The Islamic belief is that it was someone who just *looked* like Jesus who died,
which, when you think about it, is the polar opposite of Christian belief.
Our teaching is that Christ died as a substitute for us,
whereas Islam has a man dying as a substitute for Jesus;
it's an absolute reversal of the gospel message.
So Muslims think somewhere along the track we have been deceived.

Have we? Have we been deceived? I don't think so.

The Biblical accounts are good history,
the resurrection and post-Easter events make it clear
that it was Jesus who was crucified and not an imposter.

Today, as it was in the time of Jesus himself,
it's those who claim a deception who need their eyes opened.

If you look at verse 48 you'll see the second objection from the Pharisees;
the objection that looks at the peer group and sees no examples of belief.
"Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No!" they say.

One of the concerns that has been raised
by the increasing use of social media
is that people are simply surrounding themselves with like minded people.
Because of the algorithms that companies like Facebook use,
you only see and hear from people who are just like you.
This is why the election of Donald Trump
came as a such a surprise for journalists in the US,
because many of them simply didn't know any Trump supporters.

This is not a new problem.
The Pharisees take a look around within their own group
and they don't hear anyone believing in Jesus,
they don't see anyone following Jesus,
and so that gives them reason to keep on resisting.

It's the objection that says
"this is not a belief for our kind, it's not a belief for our people."
And how you define *your people* may vary.
You may think that belief in Jesus is not a belief for your culture,
maybe not for your family,
maybe not for people of your intelligence.
When I was attending a government high school,
hardly any teachers were believers (if they were they didn't let it be known),
and certainly at university none of my lecturers had any belief whatsoever.
It could have been very easy to think that belief in Christ
was not something that intelligent people professed.

In fact, this is exactly what the Pharisees are thinking, take a look at verse 49
this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them.
Here's the third reason for the Pharisees maintaining their skepticism.
Belief is something for the ignorant!
We're the class that understand the law (by which they mean the OT law),
if this crowd had the same understanding that we do,
then they'd be able to resist Jesus.
But as it stands they must have some kind of curse on them
that has blinded them to the truth and enabled them to be deceived.

And the same accusation is often leveled today.
If only these Christian people had a proper understanding of philosophy,

*If only they had a proper understanding of science,
If only they had a proper understanding of the world's cultures,
then they'd realize that that belief in Jesus is very foolish thing indeed!*

This is the assumption I hear in the work of the popular atheists that have become well known over the last few decades, people like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins. The assumption is that Christians believe what they believe because they are ignorant of science.

Like most people, the argument goes, Christians are people who would like to have some idea of how the world began and how we got here, it's just that they have never graduated from the Bible's explanation. Smart people, the argument continues, understand that we have alternative explanations, so God is not needed. The assumption is that God was only ever invented to fill in a gap in our knowledge, and now that we can fill that gap with other ideas, Christianity remains a outdated and unsophisticated theory to be holding on to.

And so like the Pharisees, the clever voices of our day write off Christian faith as a deception believed by a certain class of feeble-minded religious fools. Maybe you've had interactions where people have thought this about you, Maybe you're one of the clever people who thinks this about others.

SO there we have three reasons to be skeptical of Christ.
He's deceptive,
its not what our people believe,
we are too smart to believe any of that.

How did John seek to engage with this scepticism?
The early Christians were not immune to the mocking of sceptical voices, so how does John respond to these accusations?
Well, John reacts in a way that might surprise you.

One thing he *could* have done is respond to the arguments point for point. And such arguments can be made, but that's not what John does. Instead, in a subtle but stinging countermove, he simply undermines the intelligence of sceptics. Instead of arguing back, John turns to us, the readers and says "These sceptics are really dumb!" He invites us to be sceptical of the sceptics!

Have a listen from verse 50: Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, ⁵¹ "Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?"

Do you remember Nicodemus?

We met him back in chapter 3 when he came to Jesus at night.

He seems to believe that Jesus has come from God but he's a bit shy about it, he doesn't want to go public with his belief.

And hear he is again, speaking up for Jesus in verse 51.

Notice how John reminds us that Nicodemus was one of the Pharisees' own number. Now how does that square with what we read in verse 48?

Remember, the Pharisees' argument in that verse was that belief in Jesus was not something that could be found among their own, *yet in among them was Nicodemus*, a Pharisee who was ready to believe.

It goes to show that what you see of your own community can never be the final word.

Start asking a few questions and you might be surprised as to who believes, that's if they feel brave enough to come out of the woodwork.

It's also an encouragement for us to perhaps be a bit more open about our faith.

You never know which employees might appreciate the encouragement of a colleague with similar convictions; maybe there's a niece or nephew with a newly born faith who could use the encouragement of a believing uncle or aunt.

Nicodemus was right to believe in Jesus, but he could have been more open about it.

The presence of Nicodemus here also teaches us

that the reason we may not hear much about Christianity in some contexts isn't because no-one believes, but because people are shamed into silence.

The Pharisees have been too quick to assume that they're all thinking alike.

let's not make that mistake ourselves; the mistake of assuming Jesus belongs only in some circles and not others.

And John points out that there's a second mistake that the Pharisees have made

Have a listen to their response to Nicodemus in verse 52: They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee."

Sounds like a confident assertion,

Jesus is from Galilee, and there's no prophet from Galilee.

So Jesus can't be the person he claims to be.

But have a look at what John puts next in his Gospel.

Chapter 8 begins with the story of the woman caught in adultery, it's the story where Jesus offers the famous words

"let him who is without sin cast the first stone." It's a great story!

But it probably wasn't part of John's original Gospel.

Maybe the event really happened,

but their arguments were no match
when it came to experiencing Jesus face to face.
Jesus himself is the best argument for our belief in him.

You know one of the things I like best when travelling into the city
Is that I love to stand right underneath the Harbour bridge
Maybe at Dawes Point or Milsons point,
right underneath it so that it soars above me.
All the specifications tell me that its one of the great bridges of the world,
But I don't need a technical argument when I'm standing underneath it.
When I experience it, I know it's a great bridge,
and so it is when we experience Christ.
When we read of his life,
and when the Holy Spirit reveals to us the reality of Christ,
we know that he's the one we must believe in.

This is why the popular atheists like RD and CH have been so unsuccessful,
because Jesus is not simply an hypothesis that can be replaced,
he is someone we encounter, just as these temple guards did.
Richard Dawkins hasn't understood that, and that shouldn't surprise us
because clever people aren't always that intelligent.

I'll lead us in prayer.