Sunday March 20, 1977

Book 6

"IDEAS AND THINGS" Matthew 11:2-6

People asked Jesus all kinds of questions. Some of his enemies asked questions in an attempt to trick him. Others asked questions seeking his advice and counsel. People also asked questions about him. "Can this be the Messiah?" "Where does this man get his authority?"

Even John the Baptist, the man who had baptized Jesus had questions to ask as our scripture lesson for this morning indicates. John the Baptist had been put in prison for his preaching. While in prison, John kept getting reports on the activities of Jesus. The fame of Jesus had been spreading. Large crowds were following him and he had chosen a group of 12 disciples. John also had his disciples.

All this was to be expected. But what really bothered John the Baptist was that he kept hearing about Jesus healing people of their diseases, the blind were receiving sight, cripples were walking, lepers were being cleansed. Good news was being preached to the poor. John heard how Jesus had forgiven a woman caught in adultery who was about to be stoned to death. He heard that Jesus had reformed a dishonest tax collector. At a wedding, he had turned water into wine, and by some he was even called a wine-bibber and a glutton.

As John the Baptist sat in prison and heard these things about Jesus, he began to wonder, "Did I make a mistake?" "Is Jesus the Messiah?" He wasn't behaving like John thought he would. Jesus didn't act like or fit John's idea of what the Son of God would and should be.

So John sent some of his own disciples to find out if they could, if Jesus was the promised Messiah of God. They came to Jesus and asked, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" Jesus' answer to them was--"Go tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them."

You see, John the Baptist had foretold the coming of the Messiah in somewhat different terms. His idea of the

Messiah was primarily that of judgment and even terror. John had been a fiery preacher, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." He threatened his hearers with fire and brimstone. Furthermore John the Baptist lived in the wilderness and no one would've called him a wine-bibber or a glutton. His main food was locusts and wild honey. He undoubtedly thought the Messiah would follow a similar pattern. So he asked, "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" What then does this story tell us?

1. First of all, like John the Baptist and his followers, we too need to remember that there is often a great deal of difference between a thing and the idea of a thing. Have you ever prepared for someone you were expecting and then when that person arrived, you were quite surprised and maybe even disappointed because the person did not fit your idea of what he or she would be like.

John the Baptist had his own idea of what the Messiah would be. He had preached about a person who would have his winnowing fork in his hand; who would clear his threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary, but the chaff he would burn with unquenchable fire. But now in prison he only heard how Jesus was healing the sick, helping those in need and preaching good news to the poor.

We don't know for sure how John received the answer from Jesus which was brought to him, but from later history we can conclude that John accepted Jesus as the Messiah even though he didn't fit his original idea.

Now what about us? Many of us often have an idea in mind of what Jesus should be, like, or what we would want him to be, and we too can expect to be surprised.

J.B. Phillips, in his remarkable little book, "YOUR GOD IS TOO SMALL," shows how often our ideas of God are too small and unreal and then if we experience God in a way different from our original idea, we may miss God altogether because we are unprepared to experience God as God is.

Often I meet people who say, "I am an atheist!" After talking with the person, it is easy to see that he or she is not an atheist. What the person is denying is not God, but some idea of God.

Actually, all of our ideas of God are inadequate. This doesn't meant that we shouldn't have ideas about God, but rather we learn to recognize, as did John the Baptist, that the idea of a thing is not the thing itself.

The principle which is illustrated by this New Testament story applies not only to God and our Christian faith but to all of life. The idea of a thing is not the thing. Another way of saying it is that there is a difference between theory and practice. We are able to conceive magnificently and bring to pass only a shabby imitation of that conception.

Years ago, when I lived in Connecticut, I was given an opportunity to visit an old colonial house. Every room breathed into the air something of the atmosphere of the time in which the structure had been built. The house was occupied by the last surviving descendant of the original owner, a frail old woman in her seventies.

In the main room there was an old rifle hanging over the fireplace. I was impressed by its age and wanted to take it down and examine it more closely. But as I reached out, the old woman quickly caught my arm and said, "Please don't touch it. It's loaded and might go off." She went on to say, "My great, great, great grandfather loaded that gun and put it there against the day when he might strike a blow for freedom of the American colonies." "Did the old gentlemen die before the revolution," I asked.

"No," she answered, "he lived to a ripe old age and died in 1817. But he just never seemed to be able to generate much enthusiasm for General Washington's rebellion."

We can easily imagine what that old man who put that gun there must have felt. He may have spent many a winter evening in front of the fire and many a summer afternoon under an apple tree dreaming of the day when he would strike a blow for freedom. With the passage of time more and more details probably filled in the outlines of the dream. He may have even imagined a scene in which a troop of well-drilled militia would march up to the front door and say, "Benjamin, lead us to victory on the field of honor."

But then one April day, a group of his less affluent neighbors came by and one of them said, "Ben, there's been a hell of scrap at Concord, Git your gun and let's go."

This is not what Ben had imagined. He could see no connection between his idea of revolution and a grubby gang of ruffians setting out for a fight somewhere in Massachusetts. He preferred to wait until history fulfilled itself in more appropiate terms.

We all have the problem at one time or another. Some marriages fail because the people involved in it believed they would like to be married, but what really appealed to them was the "idea" of marrage. Marriage itself may have turned out to be something quite different than the idea of it.

Perhaps they had only thought of the beautiful pictures they had seen of married people spending the evening quietly by the fire. And they liked the idea of welcoming each other home in the evening after a hard day's work. But the idea of marriage did not include disagreements, hurt feelings, illness, misunderstanding,shortage of money, and sick children. Like John the Baptist they wondered, "Is this what's it's supposed to be like, or shall we look for another marriage."

Some people have an idea of the church and what it is like, and then after they get involved in a church they find it is not much like their idea at all. They are surprised to find there are sinners and hypocrites in the church. Then they know what Groucho Marx, the comedian meant when he once turned down an invitation to join an exclusive club. He said, "I wouldn't belong to a club that would take in a guy like me."

Some of us may have had the idea that the Christian faith is only to give us a nice feeling inside and that it is not in any way disturbing. We may have the idea that the faith is not much more than singing nice comfortable hymns and saying safe prayers, and confirming what we already believe.

But then one day like John the Baptist, we hear of another side of the faith, of the body of Christ which we call the church. We hear of Christians going to jail because they were involved in a battle to end segregation or some other form of injustice. Our idea of the church was not like that at all. We wonder, "Is this the Christian faith, or should I look for something else?" The idea of a thing is not always like the thing itself.

Some people, although fortunately not very many any more, even have the idea that a minister is near perfect and then are shocked one day to discover that he or she makes mistakes, is forgetful, has a temper, shouts at his children, is selfish and lots more. (This is not a confession.)

2. If then our idea of a thing, person, event or institution is different from the thing itself, we can do one of several things. We can conclude that our idea itself was totally wrong and start over with a whole new idea. Or we can conclude that the person or thing or institution is not at all adequate because it doesn't fit our idea and we can go looking for something that will conform to our idea. Or we can be willing to listen to the answer and be ready to adjust our idea because of new evidence.

John the Baptist from all we can tell chose to follow the latter course. He was at least open to being corrected. That's why he asked the question in the first place. He had only been emphasizing one aspect of the coming Messiah's ministry. Jesus didn't tell him that he had been wrong, but only that he needed to become aware of the other sides of his ministry as well. "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear and the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them."

Jesus Christ is always more than we expect him to be, more than our idea of him. We can never put him in a box of our own ideas and say--"now we have him." Rather, like John the Baptist, we have to be willing to continually re-examine our ideas about the Christ and about God. There's always something new to be learned.

At this time of year as we approach Good Friday and the crucifixion, we see again another side of Christ. In him we see the image of a suffering God, a God who himself bleeds and dies and having been confronted with this we are never able to get the picture out of our minds completely. Even if we deny all the standard doctrines of the atonement, the Christ keeps confronting us in the most unlikely places, in the faces of countless men and women who have shed their blood in all the conflicts of history that we might have life and have it more abundantly.

And there is another side of Christ that we are made aware of at this time of year. Not only did Christ himself heal the sick, give sight to the blind and preach good news to the poor, but the Bible also reminds us that when we do these things and more, we are actually doing them to the Christ who is present in the people who are hungry and are hurting.

In another part of the gospel of Matthew, we are told that when we feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome those who are strangers, clothe the naked, visit the sick and visit those in prison, we are actually meeting Jesus Christ himself. "For as you did it unto the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it unto me."

This is what Jesus wanted John the Baptist to understand, that not only is God the creator and our judge, but in Christ, God is also present where we hurt; that God loves where we are and that God asks us also to love people where they are and today that also means loving people who hurt with our money through the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering. Amen.