

“Doctor, cure yourself!” a sermon based on 1 Kings 17:8-16 and Luke 4:21-30 preached by Jordan Redding at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 30 January 2022.

I.

According to Luke, the very first word of Jesus’ public ministry is: *Today*. “Anei te rā! Today is the day!”. We’re told he goes into the synagogue and, much like we would do at church, he opens the scriptures; that well-known passage from the prophet Isaiah (*the Spirit of the Lord is upon me...*), and then he gives this short one-line sermon (if only all sermons were this short!): *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing. Today good news has come to the poor. Today the captives are released. Today the blind see and the oppressed are set free. Today, not some point in the future. Now.* Real tangible salvation for people in need. And Jesus is saying emphatically that he is the one who brings God’s salvation...

And we’re told the congregation is impressed. They speak well of Jesus and are amazed. It’s not like Matthew and Mark’s version where the congregation get angry at Jesus’ blasphemous claims. No, Luke paints the congregation in a favourable light. It seems that they genuinely want it to be true that God’s salvation has come to them.

But very quickly things turn sour. It’s a bit of a weird passage how quickly things go south. Jesus seems to hit a nerve and the congregation suddenly becomes a mob.

Have you noticed that it’s often people who know Jesus the best, who are most disappointed by him. The ones who knew him when they were young. Hearing miraculous stories about him in Sunday School where the answer to every question is always: *Jesus*. The ones who turned up to the synagogue with him Saturday by Saturday. Or to church with him Sunday after Sunday. He’s familiar to us. Domesticated by us: Jesus, the son of Joseph the carpenter. He’s one of ours. He looks after us.

All the more reason then, that we may resonate with the sudden anger of the congregation when Jesus tells them he’s not quite as tameable as that. For all the talk of salvation and the coming year of God’s favour, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, where is the evidence?

Aside from grim headlines of omicron and climate change, housing crises and tsunamis, we all have our own burdens to bear. Chronic pain and illness. Loneliness and depression. Heartache and dashed dreams. Estrangement and grief.

It’s all well and good to hear how salvation is coming to the widow in Sidon or to Naaman the Syrian. But we’re in need to. It’d be nice if Jesus could at least care for his own first! Surely, the unanswered prayers in our own life are cause for righteous anger.

For most of us today, though, we don't tend to rail against Jesus in blind rage when he disappoints us. In our day, in the age of dying Christendom, we tend to simply retreat. Our childlike wonder gradually turns to mild interest, staid indifference, weary disappointment – as we get worn down by the realities of life and preoccupied by other things.

In my experience, most of my friends who have left the church, never reached a definitive moment of rejection. It wasn't as dramatic as that. They just kind of drifted away. Wafted out the open door like a summer breeze.

If Luke were to tell his story today, I wonder whether the congregation, rather than rushing violently at Jesus, would have simply shrugged their shoulders in weary disappointment and walked out.

II.

Here at the outset of Jesus' public ministry, Luke establishes an irreconcilable tension between what Jesus proclaims, between what we *hope* for, and what we see in our lives and the world around us. If Jesus had simply said, *some day. In the future. God's salvation is coming* – there would be no problem. There's no tension there. But he said, *God's salvation is coming today, now*. There's a tension there that can't be easily resolved.

It's a tension that continues right through Luke's gospel, driving the story forward, leading things inexorably to their painful end on the cross. In fact, there are hints in our story today, at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, of the crucifixion to come at the end. Luke wants us to see the connection.

You know how, when the mob gets angry, they drove Jesus out of town and took him up to the top of a hill, threatening to throw him off a cliff? Well, the story is set in Nazareth and, apparently, no such hill exists on the edge of town. Luke is far too careful a storyteller to make this kind of factual error unintentionally. No, this is an intentional addition to the story, a foretelling of where things are headed: a hill, an angry mob, an intended execution – this time carried out on a cross.

The bitter disappointment of the crowd at the beginning of Jesus' ministry is the fuel to the fire that burns and is not exhausted until Jesus is dead. "Doctor, save yourself," Jesus predicts they will cry. And eventually they do, as they gather around the cross, scoffing: "*He saved others, let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God.*"

III.

And yet... doesn't the scoffing, the anger, the bitter disappointment, the indifference, the dashed hopes point to the fact that hope is there in the first place? That we genuinely want to believe that Jesus is who he says he is? That God has not abandoned us to our suffering. That salvation is near. That this is the day of resurrection, or renewal or restoration. The

passion of feeling, of anger, points to the inescapable fact that we do care. Something in the story of Jesus keeps drawing us back. We want to believe that we are not alone.

We're genuinely curious because we're invested in it. We suffer. We know what pain is. So, *doctor, will you cure yourself? Are you worthy of the hope we place in you?*

The mocking of the mob is, of course, correct: Jesus, doesn't save himself. And yet the great irony of the gospel is that *this* is the path of salvation. The way of a God who does not escape our human condition, but enters fully into it. Meeting us in the midst of our suffering and dying.

I heard someone ask me recently that age-old question: if God is real, why does God allow such suffering? They weren't asking it as an abstract problem. Rather they were genuinely navigating a harrowing experience. Their faith had been rocked by the senselessness of suffering.

I was trying to think what answer I could have given to the question. I don't think any answer would have been good enough. And actually, I don't think the Bible gives us a clear and satisfactory answer to that question. Suffering exists.

The scandal of the gospel is that Jesus never promises an escape from suffering. Yes, there are plenty of miracle stories in the Bible. And I have no problem believing that the miraculous life of God can alleviate suffering or unexpectedly heal lives today. But we shouldn't rely on them. Because salvation doesn't ultimately consist in escaping the cross. It culminates, centres, on the cross. The way of Jesus leads right into the heart of suffering.

It's a message that would be wildly unpopular today if society cared enough to notice. There's an ad on George St. at the moment, just opposite Knox Church, that says: *Age later*. It's selling a beauty product that supposedly staves off the signs of ageing indefinitely. It kind of sums up our society doesn't it? A society that fetishises youth and craves escapism (the Metaverse is the latest innovation that is capturing our utopian hopes and dreams). That wants to put off all the signs of our human frailty and decay. That isn't so much scared of death but is scared of all the ugliness that congregates around it. Illness, pain, ageing and frail bodies, failing minds. Suffering.

The scandal of the gospel is that we are compelled not to turn away but to look suffering full in the face. To attend to the ugliness in our lives and in the world. Not to look away. To gaze upon the crucified Christ and to see in his suffering our own. And there at the foot of the cross to add our voice to the congregation: *Doctor, save yourself! Please! For your sake and for mine!*

There are no easy answers here. The life of faith is spent here in this tension. The cross immediately before us. The claim of a God who does not magic away our suffering. But who promises to meet us in the midst of it.

And yet, is there not hope in that? Anger, yes. Doubt, yes. Despair, yes. But those *because* hope and faith stubbornly persist. Like a bit of oil and flour in the midst of famine. We are hungry but we are not starved.

We are not alone. *Today*, we are promised that Christ the Saviour is with us, that he knows our pain, sharing it with compassion. *Com-passion*. Literally, suffering-with.

Today, we are invited, through our own suffering, to learn empathy; to share in the suffering of one another, to bear one another's burdens, journeying with Christ on his way of com-passionate love.

Today, even in the storm of our raging doubt, despair, fear, anger, indifference, we may, if we listen carefully, hear the reassuring whisper of a love that endures through it all. The whisper of one whose cross is erected next to yours and to mine, who leans to us and says, *today, my friend, you will be with me in paradise*. Amen.

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