

**THE MESSAGE OF JESUS  
AND HIS KINGDOM**  
The truth that could change everything



**Part 1 'The Trouble with Jesus'**

**Luke 4:14-30 September 20**

In our new teaching series we are going on a spiritual quest so that we might better understand Jesus and his message. I remember a lady complaining many years ago that I preached at the early communion service. She told me she didn't need a sermon. She had learned it all at Sunday school! But as I embark on this journey I have to humbly acknowledge that I haven't got Jesus and his message all figured out and I never will. But I do know that there is so much more for me to grasp and understand as I dig into God's Word. So I hope you will take the risk of coming with me on this search and be open to the possibility that the church's conventional version of Jesus may fall well short of the truth.

Why are people fascinated by Dan Brown's version of Jesus in *The Da Vinci Code*, even though it is fanciful and inaccurate? Why do people trawl through the Gnostic gospels searching for a more radical Jesus? Why do his publishers claim that the next novel by best-selling children's author Philip Pullman will be '*a radical and ingenious retelling of the life of Jesus*'? Pullman has already attacked organised Christianity with his *Dark Materials* trilogy. With his new book, *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ*, to be published next Easter, the author claims he wants to tell the story of a human Jesus before Paul's '*fervid imagination*' influenced the Gospel writers into '*the idea of Jesus being the Son of God*'. People are fascinated with Jesus but they feel they need to somehow reinvent or rediscover him?

As we saw in the *Journeys* film series in August, there are lots of people who have had life-changing, spiritual experiences that tell them there is something more to life. But they also know that this *something* cannot be reduced to the formulas or rituals of organised religion. There are also, sadly, lots of people who have given up on organised religion because of bad or boring experiences – but they still have a high opinion of Jesus. So here are lots of unsatisfied people who have an intuition that somehow Jesus and his message are far better than anything they've understood so far.

Over these next few months we are going to go back into the gospel narratives of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. I think we may discover that they are far more radical and disturbing, far more visionary and transformative than we had ever imagined – if only '*we have ears to hear*', as Jesus says.

Please don't think I'm claiming to have Jesus all sorted! But I do want my heart to be captivated afresh by Jesus and his message. I want to be open to new thoughts and new possibilities. I want to understand Jesus against the background of the politics, religion, dreams and pain of his times. I want to immerse myself in his message so that I can see our world with all its problems, challenges and opportunities in a new light. At the end of the day, I want to be changed by Jesus so that I can be an agent of his kingdom and see this tired, sad, dark world changed.

Did Jesus really have a message that could change the world? Mahatma Gandhi certainly believed he did: "*You Christians look after a document containing enough dynamite to blow all civilisation to pieces, turn the world upside down and bring peace to a battle-torn planet. But you treat it as though it is nothing more than a piece of literature.*"

There is no doubt in my mind that Jesus is the most fascinating, mysterious, uncontainable, uncontrollable, enigmatic, stunning, genuine, attractive and explosive person who has ever lived. But what if we have developed a religion that makes honouring statements about Jesus but has really missed the point of why he came? What if we teach about Jesus in sermons and books, sing about Jesus in our songs and hymns, discuss him at Alpha or in our cells, but somewhere along the way we have missed something of the rich and radical treasures in his message about the kingdom? I know I am not alone amongst church leaders today who are having to reassess some of their preconceived ideas and understanding of parts of the Bible. Let me give you a simple example.

In Matthew 24:40 Jesus spoke about the *coming of the Son of Man*. **Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left.** In the Christian circles in which I have moved for the last 45 years I have always understood that the ones trusting Jesus will be **taken**. In other words, you don't want to wake up one day and discover that your faith wasn't real and you have been *left behind*. The idea that we are going to be beamed up has, of course, been reinforced by the best-selling '*Left Behind*' series which many wise Bible teachers would regard as *seriously misguided and pastorally dangerous*. But look again at what Jesus said. **As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man.** Now, how was it in the days of Noah? Who was taken and who was left behind in the days of Noah? In the past Christians haven't been very worried about this world because they were just waiting for God to get them off this planet. Is it possible that we have got our whole focus in the wrong direction? Jesus came *down* the first time and doesn't it say that *the Lord himself will come down from heaven....* (1 Thess 4:16) the second time? But more of that later in the series.

In today's reading in **Luke 4:14-30** we find Jesus standing before his own town of Nazareth. He knew everybody there and they all knew him. Most would have been unaware of the years of prayerful preparation and study of scripture. Though some would have had heard about his baptism and the voice from heaven confirming his call and identity, almost certainly they did not know about the 40 days of testing in the wilderness. But the word is certainly out that he has been healing people in Capernaum and teaching with authority in the synagogues. Now the son of Joseph preaches to his home crowd. His text is **Isaiah 61** and he begins by saying to them, **"Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."** At first they speak well of him but a few minutes later they are ready to push him off a cliff! Why? What had he said that made them so angry? It would appear we have only the first sentence of his sermon and that would certainly have grabbed their attention. We are told **they were amazed at his gracious words**. Does it simply mean they thought he was a good speaker? Or does it actually mean that they were astonished he was speaking about God's grace – a grace that was for everybody and not just the Jews.

What Jesus said afterwards supports that interpretation. He sensed they were not following him. They wanted to taunt him with proverbs and challenge him to put on a performance. So in defence of what he was saying Jesus pointed out what happened in the days of the great prophets Elijah and Elisha. Elijah was sent to help a widow – but not a Jewish one. Elisha healed a solitary leper – and he was the commander of the enemy army. The truth hurt and made them angry. Israel's God was rescuing the wrong people. I think we can assume that in the earlier part of Jesus' address he was hammering home the same point – not about grace for Israel and fierce judgment for everybody else. That was what they *wanted* to hear. Instead he spoke about grace for *everyone*, including the nations.

If the Christian church understood, believed and lived that message – if it became increasingly faithful to the reality of what Jesus taught in word and deed – could that not bring hope to our troubled world? We live in an age of global terrorism and increasing religious conflict. But Muslims regard Jesus as a great prophet. Many Hindus are willing to consider Jesus as a manifestation of the divine. Many Buddhists see Jesus as one of humanity's most enlightened people. And Jesus was a Jew. We are wary of anything that is inter-faith and we certainly do not want to compromise our understanding of Jesus as the unique Son of God. But is there the possibility that a shared reappraisal of Jesus' message could provide a unique space or common ground for religious dialogue, a dialogue that our world desperately needs?

So back to Luke 4 - why did Jesus begin with the quotation from Isaiah 61? The passage is about the Messiah who appears in several places in Isaiah as a strange anointed figure who will perform the Lord's will. The passage does go on to speak of vengeance on evildoers but Jesus doesn't quote that bit. Instead he draws on the bigger picture in Scripture of Israel being a light to the nations. The servant-Messiah has not come to inflict punishment on the nations but to bring God's love and mercy to them. This message was shocking. It was not what first century Jews wanted or expected. But then we too must realise that the gospel always challenges our own interests and agendas.

- ❑ What if Jesus never came to start a new religion – but rather came to start a political, social, religious, economic, intellectual and spiritual revolution that would give birth to a new world?
- ❑ What if Jesus' message had practical implications for how you live your daily life, how you earn and spend your money, how you treat people of other races and religions and how the nations conduct their foreign policy?
- ❑ What if his message addressed issues like advertising, the environment, terrorism, economics, sexuality, marriage, parenting, the search for happiness and peace?
- ❑ What if the message of Jesus was good news not only for Christians but also for Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, New Agers, agnostics and atheists?
- ❑ And what if Jesus intentionally hid this message like a treasure so that we must seek it to find it?

It is this search for treasure that we are embarking on and I am not quite sure what we will find. But I am looking forward to the journey. I am ready to discover a Jesus who doesn't fit into my tidy theological categories. And I am longing for more transformation in my life and this church. And so I pray that as we go on this search we will be more inspired, moved, challenged, shocked and motivated than ever before by this Jesus and the message of his kingdom.

Jesus actually called us '*sons and daughters of the kingdom.*' When we come to him in repentance and faith and are born again, we are born into that Kingdom. And as sons and daughters of the kingdom we are to be like the kingdom. We are meant to live and display the characteristics of the kingdom. That means that our lives reflect something of the mystery of the kingdom. It is a mystery because Jesus taught about the kingdom in various ways.

Jesus began his ministry by announcing that the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand. In other words, the kingdom was now present. It had arrived in the presence and the ministry of Jesus. In signs and wonders he was enacting the arrival of the kingdom.

In other places he would teach that the kingdom is near. History was pregnant with its arrival within a generation but it hadn't quite arrived yet. Then he taught about the delay of the Kingdom and finally that the kingdom would come at the apocalyptic end to all history.

Jesus taught that the kingdom is always simultaneously – here, near, delayed and future. If we take the history line from creation to the final redemption revealed at the end of the book of Revelation, what happened in the ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension of Jesus and the subsequent unleashing of power at Pentecost was nothing less than the powers of the age breaking into the present. In Jesus we experience the presence of the future. This is where we live the life in the spirit, in the overlap of two worlds.

For our friends who do not yet believe in Jesus, life is relatively simple. They live their lives in this present world. But we live in two ages and two kingdoms. That is how we experience the Christian life – life where two ages co-exist and compete for supremacy in our hearts every day.

Is the Kingdom *already*? Yes! Is the Kingdom *not yet*? Yes! Christians are also *already* and *not yet* people! We are strange beings! This is really important as we try to understand ourselves. We don't tell people to come to Jesus and be '*spiritual warfare*' looking for somewhere to happen. As a result many Christians live their lives like people in a war zone who do not realise that they are in a war.

We are *already*, *not yet*, *delayed* and *future* people. We are *already* – I've got it, I'm a new creation adopted by my heavenly Father. But then we are also *not yet* – waiting so often for God to move any moment. But then we realise that God is not in a hurry and so much of what we long for is *delayed*. That's why Christians go on praying faithfully for the same thing for 20 years. But then at the end we know that we are going to be completely transformed. When we see Jesus we shall be like him. So we are *future* people.

The New Testament uses three tenses to describe our salvation. We *have been saved*, when we put our trust in Jesus. We were instantly justified, pardoned, adopted. But then we *are being saved* from one degree of glory to another. This is the process of sanctification whereby we gradually become more like Jesus. And finally we *will be saved* on the final day when that process will be completed. This is not just theology. This is our experience. And if we don't explain it, we set Christians up for disappointment.

But that doesn't mean we have to be fatalistic or pessimistic. We have to be realistic but what the coming of Jesus into our world and into our lives tells us is that in the mystery of the kingdom we can expect and invite the more of the future to break into the present.

*For use in your*  
**Cell, Accountability Group or on your own**

*Tell your story in terms of the three tenses of salvation. Does your Christian experience reflect the here, near, delayed and future mystery of the Kingdom? Share experiences that illustrate the different dimensions. Does this kingdom teaching help you to understand yourself better? What does it make you long for more of? What action will you take to increase your kingdom expectations?*