

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



Part 8 'Jesus the Liberator'

Luke 8:26-39

22nd November 2009

As we have progressed with our teaching series this autumn, I trust that Jesus' secret message about his kingdom has become clearer and brighter. Through the secrets hidden in his parables and the meaning of his signs and wonders, the realisation is dawning that the powers of the age to come are breaking into this present world. We are being invaded by a force of goodness, compassion, forgiveness, peace and healing. The kingdom of God is at hand and we can be part of this radical, world-changing movement.

But as we read the gospels and subsequent history we realise that there are many who do not recognise or welcome this new force. In the gospel narratives we see Jesus' enemies collaborating and plotting to get rid of him. And amazingly Jesus takes no notice. He doesn't try to be careful. Indeed, there are times when he even seems to be teasing them, taunting them and inviting them to retaliate. On Palm Sunday when the religious leaders tell him to stop the crowds treating him as a king, he refuses. His violent cleansing of the temple is a red rag to a bull. He insults the religious leaders by telling them that the little children understand more than they do. He seems determined to goad them.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter, who are trying to.... You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.... You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence... You are like whitewashed tombs... You snakes, you brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? Matthew 23

Talk about making friends and influencing people! Once again we find ourselves asking the question: Why does Jesus do this? Is he just some sort of loose canon, a hot-head who sometimes loses it? Or is there a secret method to his apparent madness? Does the secret message of Jesus require a secret method, something so unusual as to be scandalous?

The kind of demonic confrontation we read about in Luke 8 perhaps gives us a clue. For Jesus' message of the kingdom to be effective, it must first expose the evil of all alternative kingdoms. And for that evil to be exposed, it must be drawn out of the shadows where it lurks. In the gospels, demonic confrontations happen again and again. The man living among the tombs is just one example. Jesus arrives and draws out the unseen evil spirits that cause his bizarre behaviour and soon the man sits clothed and in his right mind. Hundreds come to Jesus with all kinds of afflictions and oppression. Each time Jesus draws into the light whatever is causing the oppression, so the people can be freed and restored to balance and health. Jesus is the Liberator and these liberations are visible signs of his message. At one point he says, ***'If I am casting out demons by the power of God, then the Kingdom of God has arrived among you.'*** (Luke 11:20)

But Jesus did not come just to liberate and heal individuals. He came to liberate the world. This sign and wonder is pointing us to a much larger and cosmic strategy. Individual evil spirits may be there behind the scenes - clustering in this deranged man, whispering through Peter or putting thoughts of betrayal into the mind of Judas. But his dominant opposition arises not from unclean personal demons crouching in the darkness. It comes from systemic evil in the structures and institutions of society which operates through

powerful people in broad daylight. Jesus must draw out and expose these demonic invaders, whether they are hidden beneath robes and crowns, concealed in temples and palaces, or camouflaged behind political slogans and images on coins. And the miracles of demonic deliverance should convince us that very real and dangerous forces of evil are at work in our world. These evil powers can possess, oppress, sicken and drive insane whole nations, religions and other social networks in just the same way that personal demonic spirits possess, oppress and ultimately destroy individuals.

We see Jesus directly confronting the systemic evil of the religious system when he overturns the money-changers' tables, when he calls the religious leaders hypocrites and snakes and when he heals on the Sabbath. The resulting violent and hateful reactions of the religious elite show their true character and confirm Jesus' assessment of them. But Jesus seeks to expose the dangerous spirits that inhabit not just the religious parties, but also the political institutions. He even shows that evil can invade his own group of disciples, and it can do so at the least expected moments. So we are told Satan enters Judas while he sits at the Last Supper. And Jesus says to Peter, '*Get behind me, Satan!*' just after Peter has identified him as the Messiah. So what do these unexpected incursions and exposures of evil teach us?

We come back to the heart of Jesus' message. A new force, a new spirit is in the world – not a demonic spirit but the Holy Spirit. Just as sick, destructive spirits can take possession of groups, so this new Spirit is entering people and forming them into a new kind of community that is healthy and creative – the kingdom of God. With the arrival of this kingdom, a new force enters our world confronting and exposing all other corrupt regimes. But it does not force itself where it is not wanted or welcomed. For all its power, it comes gently and in some ways, secretly.

As Jesus' kingdom movement begins to expand around the Mediterranean world, the apostle Paul writes about *thrones and dominions, principalities and powers*. In Paul's mind these are very real and powerful forces that enter groups of people and guide or even control their behaviour. Under their influence, people move together like a school of barracudas or a flock of starlings, controlled, twisted and massaged to think and do things they could never have imagined on their own. What else explains the concentration camps, the Crusades, the Inquisition and suicide bombers?

During Jesus' life there are two forces, in particular, which are opposed to God's Kingdom. The first is the Roman Empire. This conflict reaches its climax in the trial before Pilate. But even here, Rome's puppet governor seems weak and pathetic. He is manipulated by the crowds, pressured by his wife and paralysed with the fear of making a decision until he is forced to do so. Jesus stands before him, flogged and beaten, mocked and bound but it is Pilate who appears insecure, uncertain. '*What is truth?*' he asks. Jesus seems at peace, powerful in refusing to answer questions, keeping the truth, as it were to himself. He knows Pilate's power is nothing unless given from a higher authority. In the face of the simple, moral authority of Jesus, the power and authority of Rome seem brutally grotesque and ethically pathetic. It makes you think of Chinese students standing in front of tanks in Tiananmen Square or Nelson Mandela emerging from prison and rising to the presidency of South Africa. Or you think of Martin Luther King sitting in prison exercising greater moral leadership while under arrest than the police and governors who thought they were in control. Or even Gandhi who seemed to understand the secret way of Jesus better than many Christians – as he led non-violent resistance against imperialism and religious hatred. In fact, Gandhi once said, '*I consider Western Christianity in its practical working a negation of Christ's Christianity.*' He understood the scandal of the true message of the

kingdom. It exposes the weakness of the apparently powerful and the power of the apparently weak.

Jesus' second major confrontation was with the equally dark spirit of the religious elite of his day. Jesus was intent not only on demonstrating the weakness of the apparently powerful but also the evil of the apparently righteous. Step by step he draws them out. He violates their taboos and honours their villains. He tells them the truth until they can no longer hide their true desires, values and rage. When Pilate presents Jesus to the crowd, beaten and bloody, they shout, '*Crucify him!*' And then they declare, '*We have no king but Caesar!*' Offered the kingdom of God, they choose the kingdom of Caesar. That says it all! They seem to want liberation from Caesar but in reality all they want is to preserve their influence and power. If Jesus threatens their turf, they will scream for Caesar and allow their true colours to show through.

The story is familiar. The religious, political and military powers collaborate and reach an elegant final solution. Jesus will be crucified as a rebel. He will be nailed to a Roman cross – the visible symbol of Roman power and the instrument of torture and execution that is the end of all who stand up against Rome. They crush Jesus and his movement.

This is the scandal of the message of Jesus. The kingdom of God fails. It is weak. It is crushed when its message of love, peace, justice and truth meets the principalities and powers of government and religion armed with spears and swords and crosses. Like those defenceless students standing before tanks in Tiananmen Square or the Buddhist monks standing before riot shields and batons in Rangoon, the resistance movement known as the kingdom of God is crushed.

But what is the alternative? Could the kingdom of God come with bigger weapons and sharper swords? Is the kingdom of God all about crusade and holy war? What if the only way for the kingdom of God to come is through weakness and vulnerability, sacrifice and love? Jesus did say his kingdom was '*not of this world*'. What if it can conquer only by first being conquered? What if being conquered is absolutely necessary to expose the brutal violence and dark oppression of these principalities and powers? Then they can be seen for what they are and rejected, making room for the new and better kingdom?

Surely the death and resurrection of Jesus show that no human system can be trusted and that all *-isms* are potentially demonic and idolatrous. Even church and state with their sacred theologies and ideologies, like any other structure in this world, will – given the chance – execute God so they can run their own petty kingdoms. What if our only hope lies in this impossible paradox: the only way the kingdom of God can be strong in a truly liberating way is through a scandalous kind of weakness; the only way it can be powerful is through astonishing vulnerability; the only way it can live is by dying; the only way it can succeed is through failing?

When Paul reflected on Jesus and his message, he spoke of the Cross as *the weakness and foolishness of God* (1 Corinthians 1:18-25). But that weakness and foolishness, he said, were more powerful than the power and wisdom of men. When Paul looked at the Cross he saw that '*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them*' (2 Corinthians 5:19). Somehow, the defeat of Christ on that Roman cross – the moment when God appeared weak and foolish, outsmarted by human evil – provided the means by which God exposed and judged that evil, the evil of empire and religion, the evil of every individual human being, so that we could be forgiven and reconciled to God. And the reconciling movement – of which we are a part – which flows out from the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, is what we call the kingdom of God.

Over the last few weeks at Y Time we have been looking at the evidence for trusting the Bible and believing the resurrection. There's lots of evidence but there is no proof which you can use to beat people over the head with. That's not the way of the kingdom of God anyway. At the end of the day, this message will be believed only by those who want to believe, by those who freely choose to believe.

For use in your

Cell, Accountability Group or on your own

Pray for eyes to see and ears to hear.

Read together Luke 8:26-39 & 1 Cor 1:18-25

Share your observations, reflections, feelings and questions.

Reflect Do we experience difficulty believing in the existence of devils and demons?
Respond to the idea that Jesus' life and death draw systemic evil into the open and defeat it. Can you imagine another way?

Testify to the freedom you have found in Christ maybe through 'Freedom in Christ'.

Pray for those you know who are in some kind of bondage.