

Matthew 8:1-17 – Unstoppable Reversals

In today's world it is tough to be a Christian. I don't doubt in certain ways it has always been hard, and in plenty of other times and places it has been much harder. But it would be foolish to underestimate the difficulties in this time and place. We are not being persecuted – at least in any major way. The challenges to Christian faith in this country come not so much from outright aggressive opposition – though sometimes we do see that – but more significantly the culture we live in is quietly becoming more and more toxic for Christians.

In many workplaces it is increasingly difficult to be a Christian. A couple of decades ago the main difficult area was over abortion for Christian doctors and nurses. Today it is common to hear of a Christian JP in the family courts, or a Christian registrar or marriage counsellor, or member of an adoption panel or social worker being forced out of their jobs because of their consciences.

But the main challenge for Christians is not that. The main challenge is that our culture's fundamental assumptions are askew. Once there was general cultural support for marriage and sexual continence, now - at least in cities like Oxford - there is almost none. The morality of Friends and Scrubs rules.

We have become quietly more and more obsessed with money, and therefore more and more ruled by work. It is almost impossible for a Christian to stand aside from that when house prices have become enormously inflated, and employees who have other life priorities are the first to be made redundant.

Christianity is not honoured in our society it is treated contempt, derision, amusement, bewilderment and sometimes with outright hostility.

And that is exactly the environment in which true Christianity can thrive! Christianity was born in that kind of environment. It feels disconcerting for old fogies and young fogies alike. It is railed against with a mixture of nostalgia and sometimes whingeing self-pity by people like me. And it is bad. But the whole New Testament is designed to create believers with guts, and resilience, and moral steel. It is designed for such a time as this.

Some people keep aquarium fish. They are absolutely beautiful but most of them need the most incredible care to keep them healthy. They need perfectly clean water, at the right temperature, with the right nutrients and the right levels of oxygen. Some Christians are like that. Beautiful but delicate creatures. We keep a goldfish. There are times I have to confess

when he swims to the other side of the tank and disappears into the algal gloom. But he is alive and well and every bit as beautiful as those little shubunkins and sea horses. In my house at least there is only one kind of fish that is going to survive – and in Britain there is only one kind of Christian that will make it – the kind the Matthew wants to grow.

Matthew was a Jewish Christian who lived at a time when the very fabric of society seemed to be falling apart. He was converted perhaps 30 years earlier and initially he had enjoyed being a Christian within his Jewish culture. But over the years tensions had risen, and now he found himself increasingly rejected by his own people for his faith, and marginalised.

His fellow Jewish Christians were disconcerted and a bit rudderless. Were they right to follow Jesus? Doesn't it cast doubt on Christianity that it is so widely ignored or rejected? Why do Christians have so little power if they are disciples of the Lord of Lords and King of Kings?

Matthew sets out to explain. He explains centrally that Jesus really is the fulfilment of all the hopes of the Old Testament. But he explains crucially that the Bible always expected many to reject Jesus – that is no surprise. And it always expected him to win his battles gently and quietly.

A central and important section of Matthew's gospel is chapters 11 and 12. In those chapters people either seem confused about Jesus or they reject him outright. In chapter 12 Matthew explains this by quoting from the prophet Isaiah – who spoke about a mysterious servant to come.



Matthew 12:17-21

Crucial points

He is gentle – “bruised reed he will not break”

But he will be successful – “in his name the nations will put their hope”

Vital as context for Matthew 8-9

Matthew 8-9

One thing comes out again and again – his authority.

Collection of stories organised by Matthew – different order in other gospels.

But we can be tempted to read that with a cynical eye

“He may have been authoritative then. What about now?”

Matthew's answer clear – he is still authoritative

But as the gentle servant

His ministry took him to the apparent defeat of the cross
But he rose again declaring “all authority in heaven and on earth is
given to me”
Matthew 8-9 sets out Jesus’ authority
Authority which is now exercised in a different way

Structure

Today – unstoppable reversals

1. Unstoppable cleansing – vv1-4

“Man with leprosy”

Used to describe a variety of diseases

Significance: viewed with revulsion, separated from society

“The person with such an infectious disease must wear torn clothes, let his hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of his face and cry out, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’ As long as he has the infection he remains unclean. He must live alone; he must live outside the camp. (Leviticus 13:45–46)

A paedophile, A child murderer – Jon Venables

Something is going to happen

KJV – “And behold” v2

The man approaches

This was forbidden – but something has made him come

Ambiguity about how he approaches

“knelt” could be translated “worshipped”

“Lord” could be just “sir” or could mean effectively “Son of God”

He recognises the unique authority of Jesus – v2b

“If you are willing” should have been “if God is willing”

The key issue is absolutely clear

“if you are willing you can make me CLEAN”

Jesus said “be CLEAN”

Matthew reports “he was [lit.] CLEANSED of his leprosy”

- Not about physical healing it is about being made acceptable.
 - We don’t display our shame as a leper was forced to, but we have it.
 - Britney Spears’ shaved head
 - Things we are ashamed of – lost of bravado in our world – but hides lots of shame.

The true significance of this

A COMPLETE REVERSAL OF THE WAY THINGS ARE
SUPPOSED TO WORK.

Uncleanness was contagious

- Shame doesn’t just go

- We can hide it
- It may fade into the background
- We may even try to deny it with bravado
- But it doesn't just disappear ... rather it tends to spread.

But with Jesus CLEANNES WAS CONTAGIOUS

Imagine a dirty – oil stained – person. You shake their hand you get dirty.

Imagine touching that oil stained man – AND HE BECOMES CLEAN!

- Hidden Shame (to quote Elvis Costello) is one of the ailments of human beings
 - We wear a mask
 - Jesus says “I know”
 - In one sense you are like a leper
 - “I am willing to make you clean”
 - His touch brings contagious cleanness.
- And this is happening still
 - Not that there are no secret sins
 - But the touch of Jesus means they don't have a hold on us
 - The touch of Jesus brings genuine renewal in our hearts

2. Unstoppable inclusion – vv5-13

Centurion – an outsider in a different way

In many ways an insider

Racially – the Romans ruled the world

Status – centurion was high status

Power – wielded all the power in Palestine

Outsider because –

centurions “don't do God”

esp centurions “don't do the God of the Jews”

The Centurion approaches – vv5-6

Jesus' reply

Probably not “I will go and heal him”

More likely a question “You want ME to go and heal him?”

To Centurions Jews had a nasty squalid little faith

Hopelessly parochial – only followed one God.

Sometimes called “atheists” because one God was as good as none

Lazy

Since they rested on the sabbath

Hopelessly backward morally

E.g. Insisting on sex only in heterosexual marriage

Dangerously lawless

Since they held their law to be higher than Rome's

Pathetically low status

The Jewish quarter in Rome was generally filthy and poor.

But the Centurion approaches

Like one of Richard Dawkins disciples walking into church

Like a Muslim imam asking to study the Bible

Like a local politician knocking on my door not for my vote, but to find out about Jesus

IT DOESN'T HAPPEN! ... "You want me?"

But the Centurion goes further – vv8-9

"You don't have to touch him – just say the word"

"I know about authority and you have it in spades"

Jesus points out the core issue

He is "astonished" – you have to do something pretty amazing to surprise Jesus! – v10a

His faith is a step towards full Christian faith

Most people just have faith in him as a miracle worker – who needs at least to touch the person

This man has faith in him as a man whose word alone carries supreme authority.

And he is a gentile! – v10b-12

Note three things

1. all kinds of people from all kinds of places will come and join the ancient people of God – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob
2. many of those who ought to be there will be thrown out – "subjects of the kingdom will be thrown out"
3. The defining issue is faith in Jesus.

- And this is happening still
 - Old "subjects of the kingdom" increasingly turning away from Jesus
 - Renewal coming from amazing places
 - Typical Christian in London is under 30 and black
 - Amongst us
 - Oxford University student "you want me to help you?"
 - Muslim imam studying the bible
 - Christianity always renews from the spiritual margins – the lepers and the centurions

3. Unstoppable forgiveness – vv14-17

A simple healing – vv14-15

Receiving from Jesus doesn't need to be spectacular

Extended to all kinds of people – v16

The explanation – v17

Jesus is the Servant predicted by Isaiah

Explains what Jesus is doing

Because it relates healing “he took up our infirmities”

To the forgiveness won on the cross

But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5)

Jesus makes us clean through his death on the cross

Because there he paid for all our dirty little secret sins

- What Jesus is doing in these verses he is doing still