

John Docherty, 2018-09-16
“... I have set my face like flint ...”

I think the passage from Isaiah chapter 50 serves as a nice backdrop to the passage we read from Matthew 5.

When Jesus makes reference in Mark's gospel to the fact that those listening to him have heard “such and such”, but I tell you “something else”, it's true that his immediate reference is to the accumulated traditions, rules and regulations that have grown up around the Law.

He's trying to refocus their attention on what is at the heart of the Law, rather than on the myriad ways the Scribes and Pharisees, have tried to codify the observance of the Law; or on the ways people have tended to interpret how they should behave in general.

In this particular instance, he's clearly encouraging his hearers to adopt a manner of responding to violence that prevents the violence from escalating.

- You shouldn't return evil for evil, but rather, you should always act in ways that are constructive, not destructive.
- You should treat others the way you would like to be treated yourself
- etc.

But as I've been looking at this passage over the last little while, I think I've begun to see links to other passages, including the passage we read from Isaiah 50.

For example, if we take the passage from Matthew 5 and back up a bit, you'll recognize it as part of what we like to refer to as the Sermon on the Mount. The sermon starts at the beginning of chapter 5 and carries on until the end of chapter 7, but, in some ways, I think the content of this particular chapter is probably one of the best loved passages in the Gospels – everybody's probably at least heard of it, and even the most nominal Christians can probably paraphrase parts of it :

- blessed are the meek, because something good will happen to them;
- blessed are the peacemakers, because something good will happen to them as well;
- blessed are ... uh ... some other kinds of people ... because ... um ... something good will happen to them as well

It *is* true that the beginning of chapter 5 is full of blessings. Jesus starts off his discourse with words of encouragement and comfort.

He knows his audience, and he knows what they're going through – they're under a

brutal Roman occupation after all – so he quite compassionately addresses them in a way that's intended to strengthen them; to calm their fears; to assure them that they have not been forgotten by God.

And at the same time, he is, of course, also painting a picture of the perfect disciple :

–the one who is humble enough to be meek, while courageous enough to be a peacemaker;

–the one who will at times be human enough to mourn the losses that come with life, while secure enough in an appreciation of God's love to be able to put these losses into perspective;

–the one who has enough strength of character to hunger and thirst after righteousness, while also having enough strength of character to be merciful to those who may be less inclined in that direction.

As I've pointed out in other meditations, I think it's obvious that not everyone in the crowd is meek, or in mourning, or peacemakers, or merciful, but Jesus takes pains to cover the ground as fully as he can. Surely everyone there that day can recognize something of themselves somewhere in Jesus' words. And surely anyone reading those words today can also see something of themselves in Jesus' words.

But Jesus' words aren't only comforting; they're also challenging.

While he begins his discourse with words of encouragement and blessing for those who may be struggling, the text fairly quickly hints that there is work to be done.

Already by verse 13 he starts to challenge his hearers :

“You are the salt of the earth, but if the salt has lost its taste ... it's good for nothing”

From that point on the sermon becomes more of a sermon, and less of a benediction :

–“Don't think that I've come to destroy the Law and the Prophets – I've come to fulfill them.”

–“Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you won't make it into Heaven”

–“You've heard it said But *I* say ...”

It's a call to action; a call to strive to be the people that God expects them to be.

But it's a call to action that will inevitably have consequences.

I think I read in these passages an attempt to prepare his hearers for the likely reaction to their faithfulness to this call. Already in verse 10 of chapter 5 he tells them "... blessed are you when you're persecuted for my sake, because this is the way 'they' have always treated prophets and people of faith."

He doesn't elaborate on who 'they' are who persecuted the prophets, but one can assume he means those who feel threatened by the prophet's message.

His instruction to his hearers, then, is to expect that they will face resistance as they embody the way of faithfulness that Jesus is calling them to.

And that brings me to the passages that were read from Isaiah and Matthew a few moments ago.

The Isaiah passage is suggested by the Lectionary - the Matthew passage isn't. Another passage from Mark is suggested instead. I'll look at the Mark passage in a moment, but I asked to have the Matthew passage read in its stead, because I think I can see a relationship between it and the passage from Isaiah that nuances how I've always understood this passage from Matthew.

First, let me read part of the Isaiah passage again.

"The Lord has given me the tongue of a teacher, that I may know how to sustain the weary with a word.

Morning by morning he wakens ... my ear to listen as those who are taught ...

I gave my back to those who struck me,

and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;

I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

The Lord God helps me;

therefore I have not been disgraced;

therefore I have set my face like flint,

and I know that I shall not be put to shame;

he who vindicates me is near.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?

Let them confront me.

It is the Lord God who helps me ..."

Now let me read part of the passage from Matthew again :

"You have heard that it was said, "An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." But I say

to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile.”

I'm sure we've all heard sermons on this Matthew passage that try to correct the impression that Jesus is calling his disciples to be doormats; miserable creatures that will be taken advantage of at every turn.

Particularly in Mennonite circles, I'm sure you've heard sermons that argue in part that Jesus is saying that it is never permissible to react to violence with further violence. I have shared sermons along those lines here at MFM. I've suggested that one way of understanding this passage is to understand it as an injunction to refuse to behave in such a way that you simply feed into the spiral of violence that will ultimately escalate out of control. It's a way of saying “the violence ends here, with me”.

Of course, in the real world, outside the rarified atmosphere of our worship services, absorbing the violence into oneself may well mean one's destruction. There are those who will not be shamed by your refusal to engage in violence, and who will only too gladly use that apparent passivity to oppress and dominate with impunity.

It *can appear* to be a formula for failure, and an invitation to slavery, suffering, and eventually, annihilation.

Who would willingly embrace such a calling?

Well, Jesus himself, for one.

Let me read the passage from Mark's gospel that was suggested by the Lectionary :

Mark 8:31-32a

“Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. He said all this quite openly.”

Mind you, this was only said to his closest disciples, and it didn't go down well with them. It certainly didn't sit well with Peter, who, we're told “... took him aside and began to rebuke him.”

We're not told how Peter rebuked him, though it's noted by commentators that this word ‘rebuked’ implies the same kind of action used against demons, nor are we specifically told what part of the foregoing he found objectionable. Later in Matthew's gospel Peter's

rebuke is presented as : “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.”

The question then becomes, 'why does Peter find this news this so objectionable'?

I think it's fairly obvious that hearing from someone you care about that they will be killed will generate a strong response. In and of itself, this news is disturbing. But different commentators speculate about why this news is creates particular distress for Jesus' disciples :

One says “The rebuke indicates that Jesus' declaration was radically new and that the disciples were totally unprepared to receive it: a rejected Messiah was incompatible with Jewish convictions and hopes.”

Another says “The disciples are completely unprepared for it. They have nothing to draw upon to process the concept of a suffering, messianic Savior. They are dumbstruck. And angry. So Peter pulls Jesus aside and chastises him for the non-sense of his disclosure.”

Let me engage in a little of my own speculation here.

Is it possible that Peter saw in this declaration of Jesus' an admission of failure?

Let's set aside for the moment the fact that Jesus *does* say he'll rise again three days later – none of the disciples seem to have taken that seriously at all – or at least, they don't seem to have understood what Jesus was trying to tell them.

Remember, no one was waiting outside the tomb for Jesus' resurrection.

So is it possible that Peter only heard a prediction that this entire movement of hope and new life was doomed; that Jesus was going to end up rejected and ridiculed like so many of the prophets who had come before him?

Is it possible that his rebuke was along the lines of “Jesus – you're bringing the gang down. Lighten up a bit – things are going really well. There's no way the authorities can stop what you've started”?

Or is it possible that the seeds of doubt are beginning to take root? Is Peter afraid that Jesus might just be right about how this is all going to end and that he needs to hear from Jesus that he has misspoken; that his words were misunderstood; that what he meant was that they'd have to face some serious obstacles but that everything would work out for the best?

But Jesus will have none of it.

His response to Peter is harsh – perhaps overly harsh – and another hint at the level of tension hanging over Jesus as he anticipates the crucifixion.

“Get behind me Satan!” he says, and tells him in no uncertain terms that Peter can't see what's really at stake here.

And if I can speculate a bit more, he's also telling him that what will happen is inevitable. Once one has committed to following the way of peace, one will need to accept that there will be resistance, ridicule, rejection, and repression.

Some thirty years ago, when I started working with refugees here at the Maison de l'amitié, I remember whining to a colleague that the work of advocacy on their behalf felt like wading through mud moving in the opposite direction – it took all our energy just to keep from slipping backwards, let alone make any forward progress.

The colleague in question was a wizened little catholic nun who looked up at me, shaking her head.

“John”, she said. “What kind of a Christian are you? (she knew I was a lapsed Catholic, by the way) Isn't it the Christian's duty to move against the stream when the stream is clearly moving in the wrong direction?”

Those words of defiant trust that this was the right thing to do, from a little woman many years my elder, has been a touchstone for me over the years as moments of discouragement have crept in.

But Jesus also says that there will ultimately be redemption, and victory over the powers that rule with injustice and cruelty.

He goes on to address the larger crowd following him and tells them “... if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

I think I hear in these words an echo of Isaiah who was calling the people of Israel to embrace justice and right relationships, but who also understood that working for justice and right relationships will always provoke resistance from those who benefit from injustice and unequal relationships.

Isaiah is basically issuing *his* statement of defiance in the face of injustice, and his

determination to speak truth and seek a faithful walk with God, regardless of the price to be paid, and I think I hear echos of Jesus' call to turn the other cheek in the face of injustice :

“... I will let myself be struck on the back;
I will turn my cheek to those who would pull out my beard;
I will let myself be insulted and spit upon;
But I have set my face like flint, and I know that I shall not be put to shame;
because he who vindicates me is near.”