
It's Working

Isaiah 35.1-10, Matthew 11.2-11

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 12, 2010 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Around ten years ago, when I was the pastor of a neighborhood church in England, I got a call from a woman in distress. She said, "Pastor, my house is haunted. Can you come and do an exorcism?" Now, you may be aware that one thing I don't possess is adrenaline. I'm not the kind of pastor who gets a crisis call, jumps through the window of a waiting patrol car, starts up the siren and tosses a flashing light on the roof, and then heads into danger while a screech of the tires announces "Lights, camera, ministry."

But I try to take people seriously, maybe more seriously than they take themselves, especially when they're in distress. So a day or two later I visited the woman, and we sat together on her sofa as I explained that Jesus, in his death and resurrection, had overcome the power of evil, and that the way we embody Jesus' victory is through baptism. But baptism doesn't always give us freedom from fear. So I was inviting her to join me as I visited each room in the house, sprinkled the waters of baptism, and prayed for deliverance from fear. And that's exactly what we did. 15 minutes later, when we'd entered and prayed and sprinkled in each room, we returned to the sofa in the sitting room. The woman looked at me with disappointment in her face. "Is that it?" she said. "I could have done that."

She was a bit more honest and direct than most of us, but my guess is, almost everyone here will have felt like that about Christianity at some stage or other. What does it all amount to? A mysterious man long ago, who did and said interesting things and got buried for it. A whole bunch of people trying to follow him, or somehow use him as a route to immortality, and as often as not falling out with each other or turning it all into a power grab or a form of imperialism or patriarchy or division. A story of aspiration, illusion, fragility and failure. Maybe that's how you feel right now. "Is that Christianity? Is that it? That's no big deal. I could have done that. I could make that up, easy."

And the feeling's multiplied and focused when you've actually given your life to it and put yourself in personal danger because of it. We all know the cynic is the failed romantic. You don't hate if you haven't first loved. You don't feel let down if you weren't first built up. That's where John the Baptist got to. He'd proclaimed Jesus. He'd done the whole camel's hair coat and locusts and wild honey diet and call to repent thing. He'd thrown his entire life into preparing the way for Jesus. And now he'd been tossed into prison. And he finds himself thinking, "Jesus, are you for real? Is this it, or are we going to see some action? When do we get the baptizing with the Holy Spirit and unquenchable fire routine? Hey? Bring it on! I don't want to be pushy, but, really, now would be a great time."

To put John's question into contemporary language, we might say, "Hey, Jesus, why're you hanging out with the people who don't matter and not being more strategic? It seems Pilate's still running Jerusalem, Herod's still in charge in his palace, and the Jewish authorities have still got the temple and the practice of the Law all buttoned up. It feels like you haven't got the head or the heart for tackling the systemic issues. You've not even set foot in Jerusalem yet. Are you the one who is to come or is it time we were looking for someone else?" It's important to feel the force of John's question. He's basically right, and most of us for most of the centuries that have followed have wondered about the same things. When it comes to constructing a messiah, Jesus just doesn't look the part.

You can imagine John, in the loneliness of his prison cell, pondering the shortcomings of Jesus. Jesus was from Nazareth – that's another name for nowhere. Jesus lived a humble life and his disciples were a mixture of common people and formerly notorious sinners. Hardly movers and shakers. Jesus was constantly in

controversy and was destined for rejection and suffering. This isn't exactly baptizing with the Holy Spirit and unquenchable fire. Jesus looks and sounds too much like the ordinary, the mundane, the downright failure to be a messiah.

Are you John? Are you in a physical or mental or emotional place where the kingdom is very hard to see? Are you in prison right now? Do you feel duped, let down, disillusioned by Jesus? Have you lost the joy? Are you privately furious with Jesus because you believed he changed everything but everything seems too much like it always was? Have you given your heart and soul to Jesus, and now find yourself asking, "Are you the one who is to come or should we be looking for someone else?"

Listen to Jesus' answer. "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." At first reading it sounds like a catalogue of the kind of things we read in the Bible, and grabs our attention no more than a table attendant reeling off a list of the specials in a diner when we've been to the diner before and we know the specials are always the same. But we need to look closely at each of these six statements. Jesus is announcing salvation in three dimensions.

First, he's saying the salvation he's bringing reaches every aspect of human experience. It overcomes disability, by addressing blindness and deafness; it overcomes sickness, by cleansing leprosy; it overcomes alienation, by bringing hope and joy to the poor; and it overcomes death, by the power of resurrection. Jesus is gently saying to John, this may not be lightning and fire and revolution and judgment, but it's a comprehensive wave of healing on every level of existence. And healing is the heart of the kingdom.

Second, Jesus offers a succinct summary of everything that has already taken place in the first 10 chapters of Matthew's gospel. The blind received their sight when Jesus touched the eyes of two blind men in chapter 9. The lame walked when Jesus both forgave the sins of the paralyzed man and told him to stand up, earlier in chapter 9. The leper was cleansed when Jesus stretched out his hand and touched a kneeling leper in chapter 8. The deaf man was healed when Jesus cast out a demon again in chapter 9. The dead were raised when Jesus took the hand of the daughter of the leader of the synagogue, again in chapter 9. The poor had good news brought to them repeatedly, but most of all when Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount with the words, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus is gently saying to John, these are not just words, they are things I've already done.

And third, Jesus refers John to the promises and hopes of Israel. His words echo several places in Isaiah, including chapters 26, 29, 42 and 61, but especially chapter 35, our Old Testament reading for today, made familiar by its role in Handel's *Messiah*, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy." Jesus is gently saying to John, "All the promises of the scriptures are finding their yes in me." And more than that, because added to Isaiah's hope are two new dimensions, the curing of the incurable illness of leprosy and the overcoming of the final enemy of death. Jesus' salvation is no let-down, no betrayal, no disillusioning anticlimax: it is comprehensive, already fully under way, and beyond hopes and expectations.

But the trouble is, for John the Baptist, it still doesn't feel like it. Like the woman who asked me for a dramatic exorcism, and said, "I could've done that," John's not impressed.

In the satirical Monty Python film, *Life of Brian*, set in first-century Judaea, the opposition to the Romans is hopelessly split. The People's Front of Judaea is at loggerheads with the Judaeans People's Front, the Judaeans Popular People's Front, the Campaign for a Free Galilee, and the Popular Front of Judaea. One of these splinter groups has a secret meeting where a vigilante soldier asks, "What have the Romans ever done for us?" One by one his fellow freedom-fighters grudgingly acknowledge a host of benefits the Romans have indeed brought. But Reg, their leader, remains unconvinced. He finally demands, "All right ... all right ... but apart from better

sanitation and medicine and education and irrigation and public health and roads and a freshwater system and baths and public order ... what *have* the Romans done for *us*?" To which the reply comes, "Brought peace." Reg has no answer to that. And John the Baptist has no answer when Jesus describes what salvation means and how it has come with him.

Around 15 years ago I attended a conference about the renewal of the Christian faith. All the speakers came from big churches with famous ministries. Every one of them was miserable. They were full of complaints about what was wrong with the church and the world. All the speakers were cross with the world because it had strayed so far from the church. But when they spoke about the church they seemed just as cross with that too, so the argument about the world needing to be more like the church didn't sound quite so convincing. And then, after four or five of these dismal addresses, one pastor got up and simply said, "I don't know about you guys, but at my church, we're having a great time. Strangers are finding faith, relationships are being healed, people are dying in such a way that fills everyone with gratitude and the glory of God, beautiful new friendships are being made, the Holy Spirit is surprising us, and Jesus just keeps showing up." And I thought, "I want to be in his church. In fact I want to believe in his God. He seems to be having all the fun. He doesn't seem to be anxiously counting numbers of members or size of endowment or targets for diversity. He seems to be enjoying the kingdom, whatever the outcomes. The other guys seem to be so caught up in believing exactly the right things and living totally unimpeachable lives and being righteously furious with all the bad people that they seem to have lost the joy altogether."

I still want to be in that pastor's church. I want Duke Chapel to be like that. Sure, we all have wilderness times of heart or head. We all have John the Baptist times in prisons of our own or others' making, that make us wonder if Jesus is for real or if he was just a well-intentioned guy who got misunderstood. But those are the times we desperately need to look at our church, not to see perfect doctrine or squeaky-clean ethics, but to see what Jesus described and what that pastor was enjoying. Strangers finding faith, relationships being healed, people dying in such a way that fills everyone with gratitude and the glory of God, beautiful new friendships being made, the Holy Spirit surprising us, and Jesus just keeping on showing up.

Several years ago, about 9 months after I came to Duke Chapel, a worshiper who comes about once a month greeted me in the narthex. There's always a lot of people around after the Sunday worship service, and there's never time to say very much to each other. I often wonder if I've fully understood what someone's just told me, and whether they've actually had a chuckle in their cheek or a tear in their eye. This person simply took my hand, looked at me seriously, and said, "It's working." What did it mean? It was such an enigmatic remark. I pondered it for a long time. But then I thought about John's question to Jesus. "Are you for real, or should we be expecting a different kind of kingdom?" And I remembered that pastor years ago who was enjoying himself. I reflected on the life of Duke Chapel and thought, "People are finding their voice in faith. People are forging unusual and brave friendships. People are facing their own powerlessness and being filled with the Holy Spirit to take risks of patience, courage, and hope. People are feeling their hearts on fire as the good news is sung and spoken and lived. People are meeting Christ in the stranger, and entertaining angels unawares. Relationships are being healed and people are discovering ways to be with the poor and those of other faiths. It's working. This *is* for real. This is beautiful. This is joy."

Jesus and John both knew they were going to be executed pretty soon. Neither was interested in an escapist, cotton-wool gospel. But one of them saw through his circumstances to the vision of God. This sense of peace and beauty and joy isn't about material comfort or tangible success. It's about being in the groove of the Spirit. It's about being with the grain of the saints. It's about consistently finding yourself where Jesus shows up. It's about knowing that wherever you are may not be classy, may not be prestigious, may not be noticed by the great and the good, may have no relation to paid employment or career prospects or a sense of achievement; but it's something much deeper, much more important, much more permanent. And that's

dancing in the rhythm of the kingdom, singing the song in God's heart, glimpsing the dawn of salvation, breathing in the glory of God's art.

Can you see that beauty? Can you feel the peace and purpose of Christ's coming kingdom? If you can, then others will see you, as I saw that pastor all those years ago, and rediscover the joy. They'll feel their heart lighter than before, and sense their lungs filling with hope. And they'll turn to one another, and whisper, quietly but confidently, "It's working."