

Matthew 17:14-27
A hint of urgency

Have faith; be free

At the risk of sounding like a grumpy old man, I do have a bit of sympathy with those who have labelled our current society as the **snowflake generation**. Actually, I don't think it's fair to point the finger at simply the *younger* generation. I think it's more a malaise of our times, and people of all ages. I think there is something of a feeling that we all have a right to a comfortable, peaceful, happy life.

I've seen several people on news reports this week, talking about the current unfortunate restrictions of the **Lockdown**. Comments like "I can't stand this; I have to get out with my friends". And, as if this just proves they must be right, "Otherwise, my mental health would suffer".

Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to say the mental health problems don't exist, or they can't be serious. You certainly mustn't think that just saying "Snap out of it" is going to help much, not very often. Just like saying "Pray more" or "Just trust Jesus" is not automatically going to solve any spiritual problem.

But I'm starting to hear "my mental health is going to suffer" - implication, I have a right to, for example, break the Lockdown rules - being used when what all is really being said is, "Things are currently difficult, and I am feeling unhappy or stressed".

And I think we have here in this passage one of the very few times we see Jesus, no, not actually cracking under pressure, but showing the stress he is feeling in the way he behaves. It could sound as if he is snapping at this man who has brought his desperately ill son for help, and even people in general. How do you read ...

"O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me."

(Matthew 17:17)

What I think is going on here is actually that this is the moment when we start to see the pace start to quicken. Once Jesus has come down from what we call "**The Mount of the Transfiguration**", it is as if you are **canoeing down a river** and you suddenly realise that you no longer need to paddle, because the river itself is picking up some speed.

There is a **waterfall** ahead, when the river will cascade over some cliff. All very pretty to look at from this side, but absolute disaster if you're the one in the canoe as the river starts to rush headlong and then plunge downwards. For Jesus that waterfall is the Cross, obviously total disaster ... if you didn't really know what was going on. And stressful enough even if you did!

It has been quite distant in his thinking for some time, but now, it seems to me, he starts to hear the quiet but definite tick of the clock, counting down to that

Ground Zero event. Notice that “how long”:

And Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.”

(Matthew 17:17)

But I don’t think I see this as Jesus, stressed, and randomly lashing out. I wouldn’t be surprised if this meeting at the foot of the mountain is the moment when Jesus realises that this is start of the final, long stretch back home to Jerusalem, and what he knows will await him there.

The wonderful thing here, though, with these three sections of this passage, is that **Jesus starts to feel the urgency of the approaching cross, but still makes time to answer needs great and small**

Care for the child
The Call of the Cross
Cash for the collectors

- **Care for the child (14-20)**

Talk about **coming down to earth with a bump!** Think back over the previous chapter or so. Peter’s eyes have been opened to who Jesus really is:

Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

(Matthew 16:16)

Although it has to be said that Peter might have got the right word, but he didn’t really *get* what “the Christ” was all about. Jesus now starts to teach his disciples more systematically about what that would entail.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

(Matthew 16:21)

And Peter’s none too happy with that explanation. But *something* starts to take shape in his mind, surely, when - the beginning of this chapter - he and James and John are summoned to accompany Jesus.

And after six days Jesus took with him Peter and James, and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

(Matthew 17:1)

For a moment, on the top of that mountain, spiritual reality breaks through into this world.

And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light.

(Matthew 17:2)

Peter still doesn't properly get it, even though that moment is fixed into his memory forever:

... we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.

(2 Peter 1:16)

But what a relief it must have been for Jesus to speak to *somebody* who "got it". See who joined that little group on the mountain top!

And behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with him.

(Matthew 17:3)

The subject of that conversation, you will hopefully remember from last week, and Luke's account of this incident:

And behold, two men were talking with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his departure, which he was about to accomplish at Jerusalem.

(Luke 9:30-31)

Still things to clarify on the slow way back down from the mountain top. Still those disciples did not understand enough to be allowed to talk about what they had just seen:

And as they were coming down the mountain, Jesus commanded them, "Tell no one the vision, until the Son of Man is raised from the dead."

(Matthew 17:9)

And still ... is this those three disciples evading the thought of "from the dead"?

And the disciples asked him, "Then why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?"

(Matthew 17:10)

But in time, the four of them get back to ... oh, what a sad mess! Back into the thick it, for sure. Many years ago, Redruth Baptist Church was allowed the use of the building across the road at the foot of Station Hill, demolished a while back. I can't quite remember who had owned the building, but whoever had used it, those rooms absolutely stank of years and years of stale tobacco smoke. So whenever we went across the road from the chapel, open to the (relatively!) fresh air, as soon as we walked into that other building, the *yuk* of the old sour stench grabbed me.

So Jesus has been up on the mountain top with two people who *do* get it. On the way back down, those three disciples are like the open air plus a few car fumes at the foot of Station Hill. But at the foot of the mountain he is back in the thick of it.

And when they came to the crowd, a man came up to him and, kneeling before him, said ...

(Matthew 17:14-15)

That's kneeling in entreaty, not worship, by the looks of it.

“Lord, have mercy on my son, for he has seizures and he suffers terribly. For often he falls into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to your disciples, and they could not heal him.”

(Matthew 17:15-16)

I think you could understand this as the boy being seriously epileptic. The literal translation would be “moon-struck”, which certainly predates any modern medical approach to things. But we will see soon that there is something demonic involved here too. We're not actually given a clear diagnosis - that isn't Matthew's object in writing this - but it looks as if this poor lad is afflicted medically *and* spiritually.

And what was worse, there were 9 of Jesus' “the Twelve”, and they hadn't been able to do a thing to help.

So when we read Jesus' words now, what intonation do we put upon them? Is it a sharp retort? Is there something of anger there? You could read it that way. Certainly the final command, to bring the child, could seem impatient, even petulant.

And Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him here to me.”

(Matthew 17:17)

I can't claim to look into Jesus' mind here, but my instinct is to say that that is just “not *him*”. Though we have to be careful there - for we must get our mental image of Jesus *from* what he says and does, rather than project our pre-determined image of Jesus *onto* what he says and does.

But I wonder if this is something like how a soldier who has been carrying a **heavy backpack**, but given a rest break, would feel when orders come again to stand up and get moving, and has to strap that weight back onto an already weary back.

And that weight, he knows, is just going to get heavier and heavier as the road leads down from that mountain peak in the north, south to Jerusalem. Like **Frodo Baggins** carrying that ever-heavier ring to the heart of Mordor.

And so there is a hint of weariness, I think I'd almost call it, with the words

“How long am I to bear with you?”

(Matthew 17:17)

We could translate that as “how long must I *put up with* you?” At times, though it is clearly a labour of *love* ... it is clearly a *labour* of love.

And there is sadness mixed in, too, I think. His time in this world is getting short. Only for so long will he be able to step in and provide relief and healing for wretches like this lad he is being told about.

“... how long am I to be with you?”

(Matthew 17:17)

But hurt, too, I think. This world of his ... and even his disciples within it ... is being destroyed. They are destroying *themselves*, even - notice that word “twisted”, with the nuance of something crazily, *morally* unnatural. They are not putting faith where it is plainly due.

And Jesus answered, “O faithless and twisted generation, ... ”

(Matthew 17:17)

Folks, I wonder if what got to Jesus most here was the involvement of those other nine disciples in this sad scene. “Generation” can be a tricky word to translate, and sometimes it comes out quite similar to “race” or “people”. But here, in context it looks more to me just like everyone around. This sad, needy world. And, to cap it all, disciples who are *part of* that generation, part of the problem instead of being part of the solution.

Folks, can I ask you whether our lives and our attitudes are actually pretty much identical to that of “this generation”, when it comes down to it? Are our tastes in television and magazines at all different? Do we find all the same jokes equally funny? Do we desire the new kitchen, or the new car, or the new pair of shoes, with equal fervour?

One of the saddest statistics I hear from time to time is that the divorce rate among Christians is virtually identical to that among non-Christians. I know it's just a statistic, and you can read it in many ways. You can ask how the word “Christian” is defined in such studies. You can maybe argue that there would be many more non-Christian divorces, but they just don't bother to get married in the first place. Could be. But the take-home message still seems to be that being a Christian just doesn't make any difference to how likely someone is to stick at a marriage.

Folks, what difference does being a disciple of Jesus make in your words, in your attitudes, in your lifestyle? If **aliens in their little spaceship** were to observe a cross-selection of human beings, would they see any clear differences between people who believe in Jesus and people who don't? And might they find you rather too close to the border-line, not sure which classification to assign to you?

So ... Jesus perhaps wearily picks up his burden again, the burden that as he will walk towards Jerusalem will become increasingly cross-shaped ... and reaches out again with costly grace.

“Bring him here to me.”

(Matthew 17:17)

The result this time is very different:

And Jesus rebuked the demon, and it came out of him, and the boy was healed instantly.

(Matthew 17:18)

Which of course is great. But Matthew's focus is not now on the youngster being able to walk and run about without the need of a 24/7 care-giver, but those disciples coming to Jesus.

Then the disciples came to Jesus privately and said, "Why could we not cast it out?"

(Matthew 17:19)

It's quite a chilling answer, actually, isn't it? Or challenging, at the very least.

He said to them, "Because of your little faith. For truly, I say to you, if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you."

(Matthew 17:20)

I know that some of you here today have some big health issues current in your family situations. I'm not wanting to say a thing here in condemnation of what you might be thinking or feeling as the emotions slop back and forth, and the reports from the medical investigations hit you and spin you around, like storm waves pounding on a boat.

But folks, where is our faith? Does knowing Jesus put a different complexion on life from start to finish? I don't mean that you should expect - and so to speak slap yourself if you don't actively feel it at every moment - that every prayer for healing will be fully answered. But do we actually think or feel, underneath it all, that prayer to our Heavenly Father doesn't really make a whole lot of difference, one way or the other?

There is a little light here for these disciples. Jesus says they have *little* faith. He had said that that "twisted generation" had *no* faith. But perhaps it was an uncomfortably close decision. Because little faith - if placed in a great God - can yield surprising results. Not literal movements of literal mountains. We would still need to hire JCB's and blasting powder for that. But ... isn't this a challenge to take Jesus at his word ... *nothing* impossible?

Maybe we do give up too soon or too lightly?

But, even if we do, Jesus will not. For still he hears - increasingly cannot avoid hearing ...

- **The Call of the Cross (22-23)**

(Yes, notice there is no v21 in the ESV. That verse you might remember

about “prayer and fasting” is very, very unlikely to be what Matthew originally wrote. And the bit that it was probably copied in from, in Mark’s Gospel (9:29), very, very probably did not originally contain any reference to fasting.)

A bit further south again, most likely. Hear the pace quicken.

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.”

(Matthew 17:22-23)

Notice the “about to”, this time. Previously, it was just a necessity, but the “when” was left unspecified:

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

(Matthew 16:21)

Result? Quite understandably ...

And they were greatly distressed.

(Matthew 17:23)

Again, we aren’t told precisely why, and we must be careful with our guesses. But are they distressed because they *did* believe this, or because they *didn’t*? I could see a case for either.

If they are starting to believe what Jesus is repeatedly saying, that’s good ... isn’t it? But are they leaving out of their thinking those words of eventual promise and hope, “and on the third day be raised”? Are they distressed because they believe *just some* of what Jesus is saying?

And could it be that some of our unhappiness in life comes because we are straddling two worlds (**punts parting company**), a foot in each camp, a bit of what Jesus says, *but not all*? The Law, perhaps, but not the grace. The obedience - which still ain’t bad - but without the freedom ... which Jesus will mention in that final curious section of this chapter.

Or could it be that the disciples’ distress is because they see their Master’s words as evidence that he is losing it? He is developing some kind of morbid death-wish, perhaps. That outburst at the foot of the mountain ... is that a sign that he is starting to crack under the increasing, relentless pressure. They would not be the first to have tried to pull Jesus back, for the sake of his own sanity!

Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, “He is out of his mind.”

(Mark 3:20-21)

Folks, we've just recently sung about hearing "the call of the Kingdom". Jesus is doing precisely that. But the road that brings us joy was initially, for him, a road to that Cross. He recognised the sheer, utter necessity of that.

*The cross he bore is life and health
Though shame and death to him*

But, lest we be *too* distressed, set that alongside another hymn:

*Yet cheerful he to suffering goes
That he his foes from thence might free*

And finally, something of a curiosity. And, I'd say, amazing grace. Even with this enormous load to bear, Jesus has time to step in and sort something really quite trivial.

- **Cash for the collectors (24-27)**

When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?"

(Matthew 17:24)

So we're down now at the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and the nearest thing Jesus had to a registered address. Just at the time that this "two-drachma tax" - which was used for the maintenance of the Temple at Jerusalem - was due to be paid. So, in principle, it was something that a good Jew could more gladly hand over payment for than a tax to end up in Roman coffers. But we're still talking non-trivial amounts, another day or so's wages. This is nothing like the equivalent to modern society's new, unofficial unit of currency, "for no more than the price of a **latte**".

And we don't need to read in anything untoward or threatening in the tax-collectors words. It's just a straightforward, down-to-earth expectation that of course a respectable teacher - though not yet an accredited rabbi, who would probably have been exempt - well, of course he'll be expecting to pay this. It's just a polite request for that payment to be made. Umm, *now*, please ... or before we leave town, at least.

So Peter's answer is simple agreement. But ... when he gets back to their lodgings, planning to mention this to Jesus, Jesus catches him on the hop. He seems to know what is going on already. And he springs one of those innocent-sounding but clearly this-is-leading-somewhere questions.

He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?"

(Matthew 17:25)

An obvious answer, too. Although nowadays the Royal Family in this country *do* pay taxes, that's only come in in the last few decades. But in an *actual* monarchy, you can very safely bet that kings do not expect their offspring to pay

taxes. Rank has its privileges. Royal rank especially. No, it's your common people in the street who pay taxes. Simple! But not the end of the matter. Sting in the tail to follow. Actually, a very pleasant sting in the tail!

And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. ..."

(Matthew 17:26)

Sons? I know you've mentioned tax, Jesus, but ... are we still talking about this Temple Tax now? I think you've just lost me?

"However, not to give offence to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself."

(Matthew 17:27)

Well, yes, this is about that tax ... and a further lesson to learn about who you are, if you are a disciple of this Jesus Christ.

Quite a spectacular little miracle, actually. Just for once, Peter, you don't need a net, just a hook and line. Bait? Could just be implied. But ... the first thing you catch will be one of those big catfish-like things, with the hugely expandable mouths, the kind of thing that could Hoover up one of those rather clunky four-drachma coins. Not just could. *Did*. There you go.

Happy collectors. Happy Peter. Possibly even a happy catfish, if he threw it back. But teaching what?

It is the call of the Kingdom, again. Jesus claiming not just citizenship of another nation, but to be visiting royalty.

But he said "sons", plural. Peter, too, visiting royalty, it would seem, similarly exempt. Folks, that is the picture of the disciples of Jesus. We do not just march to the beat of **another drum**. We belong to another realm altogether, another *kingdom*, let's put it that way.

We are told to waive the immunity that gives us, though. People wouldn't understand. And we want them to understand, rather than to continue to be - notice my choice of words here - alienated.

Because there are two kingdoms. There will come a time when the trumpet in heaven will sound, and

"The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

(Revelation 11:15)

And people are invited, before that day, to become part of that kingdom, the kingdom that took the King to the Cross before he wore again that crown. The world is divided. We start alienated from - aliens from, not citizens of - that kingdom of our

Lord and of his Christ. And we may stay as aliens, or become citizens. Or even, as Jesus says, *sons of that kingdom, sons of that King. Sons who are free.*

So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

(John 8:36)

But the choice is to be made. Which is it to be? Will you have faith, put your trust in Jesus, and be free? Or will you cause him that anguish again that we read about in this passage this morning?

For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

(Philippians 3:18-19)

There is an alternative, if *you* will hear the call of the King of that kingdom:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

(Philippians 3:20-21)