

Listening, learning, growing

A sermon on Luke 2:41-52 & Colossians 3:12-17 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 December 2018

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Message

Jesus models for us a willingness to listen, learn and grow rather than a domineering certainty that insists on knowing who's right and who's wrong.

Sermon

As many of you know, one of our sermons went a bit viral on Facebook the week before Christmas. Typically, our sermons on Facebook have a people reach stat of about 100 and about a dozen engagements. This one had a people reach of nearly 9000 and more than 1500 engagements.

One of the weird things about Facebook is that even when the responses are overwhelmingly positive, it seldom feels that way. The positive likes and shares outnumbered the comments ten to one, which is lovely, but you only see numbers for them, whereas the comments come with detail. And the comments are where the trolls and the bitter reactionaries live and ply their poisonous trade. So reading through the comments can be pretty ugly and depressing.

The reason I'm mentioning this is because there is something that typically characterises many of those negative comments which seems to me to stand in stark contrast to what we see modelled and encouraged in the Bible readings we heard tonight. And I think it is important for our understanding of what God hopes for from us.

What I see in so many of these comments is a fierce and aggressive certainty. The writers seem absolutely sure that they know exactly what is right and what is wrong, and they have no hesitation in speaking for God and laying down the law to whoever is reading. So there are plenty of phrases like "absolute rubbish", "complete blasphemy", "clearly against the will of God", and "violating the word of God".

If questioned about why, very few of these people will come back with anything more reasoned or explanatory, let alone respectful. They either go silent, or they just shout louder with the same sort of angry condemning certainties. They seldom show any willingness to actually listen to and engage with questions or alternative perspectives. It's like they are unwilling to entertain any possibility that there might be anything worth hearing in anything that doesn't line up perfectly with what they already believe.

But there is something else going on underneath this too. Because it is apparent that they are not only very very sure that they are right; they are also very angry about other people being wrong. They seem to believe that if I'm wrong, and I'm allowed to preach my wrong views, that I am thereby a threat to the progress of the kingdom of God. So whatever they believe is wrong needs to be vigorously and angrily denounced and attacked.

I think that there is both a psychological reason and a theological reason for this. The psychological, or perhaps cultural reason was in fact part of the subject matter of that particular sermon, and that is that many of us seem to need to believe that other people are bad in order to be able to believe that we are good. So we pick issues and draw lines in the

sand and point fingers at those on the bad side of the line in order to reassure ourselves that we are securely among the good people.

The theological reason seems to be a belief that us being right about everything is one of God's biggest concerns. They seem sure that God is constantly judging us, and that God's judgement is largely based on whether we've got our beliefs right. I understand this, because the Church has long taught that we can't earn our way into the favour of God by doing more and more, but that instead we are saved by putting our faith in what God has done for us in Christ. So then the idea of faith easily becomes simply beliefs, and we can easily drift into the idea that God is now judging whether we have got our beliefs right and even how firmly and assuredly we hold them. I understand it, but I think it is a misunderstanding of God.

Two of our readings tonight have something to say to this.

Our reading from the letter to the Colossians began with a list of virtues that we are called to "clothe ourselves in": "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." There is no mention of certainty or fierce opposition to error, or even right beliefs. And although we didn't hear it tonight, this list comes in contrast to another list, a few verses earlier, of behaviours that we "must get rid of": "anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language." There is no mention of error, doubt, uncertainty, or even being flat out wrong, but the things it does list could have been describing some of last week's Facebook comments.

The apostle seems far more concerned with our attitudes to one another and the ways that we speak to and treat one another than with whether we are right in all our beliefs.

Not only that, but in the part we did hear, it goes on to say "above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." Above all. Surely that means 'the most important thing'. And that is entirely consistent with what Jesus said he wanted his followers to be most known for. He didn't say they will know that you are my followers by the fact that you are right all the time and that you make sure everyone knows it. He said they will know you are my followers when they see the love you have for one another.

Now this same passage did go on to talk about "letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly" and it urged us to "teach and admonish one another in all wisdom". I have no doubt that in the minds of many of those angry Facebook commentators, that is what they were doing – teaching and admonishing us with all wisdom.

But perhaps that's an example of what can go wrong when you focus on one verse and forget about its context. The encouragement to teach and admonish one another is carefully prefaced by a whole section urging us to "get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language", and to "clothe ourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" and "above all, love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony." The kind of teaching and admonishing that would fit that description is not going to be experienced as aggressive, nasty and judgemental.

Now if you are wondering what any of this has to do with the Christmas season, let's turn to the gospel reading we heard, one of the only stories from Jesus's childhood. When we are learning from the stories of Jesus's birth and childhood, we have two levels of revelation.

There are the things we see Jesus doing or saying, and there are the things that those things reveal about God and about what God is doing.

This story tells of something that happened when Jesus was 12 years old. He was mistakenly left behind in Jerusalem when his family headed for home after the Passover festival, and after three days searching, his parents found him in the temple. We are told that he was “sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”

Now it is common to focus in on that last phrase, and note that the twelve year old Jesus was amazing everybody with his understanding and his answers. We tend to focus there because it reinforces our picture of Jesus as an authoritative teacher, and we see him as having a supernatural level of knowledge, even as a child.

But what happens if we focus on the previous phrase, and hear that Jesus “was sitting among the teachers, *listening* to them and asking them questions”?

That’s different, isn’t it? Suddenly, instead of a Jesus who can beat down everyone else’s arguments with his superior knowledge, we have a picture of Jesus as an active learner, respecting the wisdom and opinions of others and carefully hearing them out and asking questions to learn more from them.

If that’s so, then not only would God want us to be following that example of humble active learning, but we have a God who is willing to come among us as one who doesn’t know everything and needs to listen and learn and grow.

This idea is a bit of stumbling block for some people, because we can get a bit stuck on the idea that since Jesus is God, he must know absolutely everything. But would it really make any sense to talk of God emptying himself, humbling himself and being born as a fragile baby if we also thought that somehow that ‘fragile’ baby was imbued with supernatural knowledge and power from birth? Apart from anything else, it would make a nonsense of the final verse we heard that described Jesus as “increasing in wisdom” as he grew up.

No. As a newborn baby, Jesus knew no more than the rest of us as newborn babies. He knew how to breathe, cry, and look for a milky nipple, and that was about it. Everything else came over time as he “increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favour.”

And if you think that idea through, is there really any reason to imagine that there came a point where Jesus’s learning was so perfectly complete that he no longer had anything he could possibly learn? Probably not. Isn’t it more likely that the revelation of perfectly whole humanity continues to be characterised by a willingness to sit with others, “*listening to them* and asking questions” and continuing to grow in wisdom and understanding.

Certainly Jesus is not afraid to plant his feet and speak his mind, admonishing and correcting others, especially whenever he encounters so-called teachers and leaders wielding their knowledge and power to disempower and belittle others. But the picture of Jesus that emerges in the gospels is never one of the crusading judge, thundering against every hint of error and condemning those who don’t agree with him. Instead, the dominant picture seems much more consistent with the picture of the adolescent Jesus, clothed in “compassion, kindness,

humility, meekness, and patience,” lovingly and respectfully listening to others, asking questions, and growing in wisdom and understanding.

This is the God who has summoned us here tonight. This is the God who is among us, listening, engaging, loving. And when we get something wrong, this God does not see that as an occasion for angry condemnation, but as a welcome opportunity for more loving conversation so that we can live and listen and learn and grow together.