

# Faith as Medicine for Sick World

*A sermon on Isaiah 1:10-20; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 & Luke 12:32-40 by Nathan Nettleton, 7 August 2016*

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## Message

There are numerous competing claims about what a faithful Christian life looks like, and sometimes the truth about following Jesus may be the least palatable of them all.

## Sermon

A number of us are, or have been or will be, in the situation of requiring major medical treatment to deal with some serious physical or mental health problem. Sometimes in unexpected emergency situations, others have to make hasty decisions for you, but more often we have the time to grapple with the difficult decisions about what sort of treatment we will agree to subject ourselves to.

Like the image in our reading from the letter to the Hebrews, there is an important interplay of faith and hope involved in these decisions. We have a hope for what life could look like if we were fully healed, and then, with that hope to sustain us, we have to put our faith in some course of action that promises to get us there.

Of course, as many of you have discovered with healthcare, the difficult part is weighing up the competing advice. Dubious alternative and unproven solutions can look very attractive when the mainstream medical solution is very unattractive. At present you look and feel quite fine, but the doctors may be telling you that you have cancer, and the treatment they are recommending promises that your hair will fall out and that you will feel like shit for most of the next six months. If the treatment is going to make you feel a lot worse, it can be hard to put your faith in it and hold on to the longer term hope that it promises.

Much of the picture I've just described is equally true of the difficulty we have making decisions about what is needed to address the deep sicknesses and wounds that are besetting our society and our world.

We live in a horribly sick world. Despite massive advances in knowledge and technology, we find ourselves powerless to address the sicknesses that are destroying our ecosystems, sending greed and economic inequality spiralling out of control, plunging more and more of us into an abyss of anxiety disorders, depression and suicide, and fuelling raging fires of hostility, resentment, fear, hate crimes and terrifying violence. Every single one of us is affected by these things, and we are showing symptoms in our bodies, minds and souls.

These are profoundly spiritual problems, which probably explains why contemporary politics seems to have less and less ability to tackle them. Indeed, one of the symptoms of the sickness is our increasing inability to realistically face up to the diagnosis and accept the painful medicine.

With a personal medical condition, we can usually accept that the necessary treatment will make things worse before they get better. But on the national or global stage, if politicians tell us that same truth and promise to do the painful things needed, nobody votes for them. We don't want to take our medicine, so we are easy prey for political snake oil merchants.

But as I said, these are profoundly spiritual problems, so it is not only politicians who are promising answers – often deludedly simple answers. There are all sorts of solutions being promised in the religious marketplace too, and many of them too promise much and deliver nothing more than disillusionment.

The Bible readings we heard read tonight highlight at least three different attitudes to what it means to follow Jesus on a pathway of healing in the midst of this sick and broken world.

Many seriously religious Christians are convinced that the right way to serve God in the midst of the world's hell-bent chaos is to turn our backs on it and just focus on being pleasing to God ourselves. We can't change anybody else, they say, so all we can do is get our own house in order. There's a fair bit of truth in that, and this approach is quite widespread. It takes several forms.

One form is identified and criticised in our first reading from the prophet Isaiah. It might be called "ritual perfectionism". We can imagine that what God most wants to see from us is that we get our worship exactly right. In Isaiah's critique, it is about getting the sacrifices and the prayers and calendar of sacred festivals right. But similar things continue in our day, and I think this can be a danger for us here in this church. We give a lot of attention to getting our worship right – to making it beautiful and deep and rich and inclusive. And it is easy to slide into thinking that if we do this really really well, then we will have made it, and God will be pleased and we will have done our bit for a better world.

The critique from the prophet Isaiah and from tonight's psalmist is scathing. God hates your perfect worship, they thunder. No matter how perfect you make it, God will despise it if your lives and your relationships with those around you are not being transformed to reflect the love and mercy of God.

Despite what some of our low-church protestant friends want to suggest, this is not actually a dismissal of any of the elements of sacramental worship. Isaiah even includes praying in the list of things God will condemn if you are not also growing in your capacity to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, and plead for the abandoned. Our worship must both reflect and contribute to a change in our lives; in the way we engage with those who bear the wounds of a broken world.

There is a picture in the words of Jesus that we heard tonight which connects with another version of the view that we can't really do anything much to change the world. I don't think this is really what Jesus was talking about, but the image he uses has become popular with some people.

He warns of the messiah coming at an unexpected hour, like a thief in the night, and he speaks of our need to be ready and waiting. We heard this image linked with a promise that it is the Father's pleasure to give us the kingdom, and an exhortation that we should therefore invest in the treasures of heaven, for where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also.

Sometimes this is used to support a very spiritualised view of following Jesus. We don't have to worry about the state of this world. Our investment is elsewhere, in some heaven up there or off in the future. The transformation of the world is God's job, nothing to do with us. Our

job is to wait, to keep our hearts and minds on the things of heaven, and wait for God to come and take us home.

Of course, this approach usually overlooks that fact that Jesus's words about treasure in heaven were linked in the very same verse with him saying, "Sell your possessions and give generously to the poor." That doesn't actually suggest hiding from the world and just waiting for God's salvation. And, when we look at the gospel more widely, Jesus rarely speaks of the kingdom as something that is elsewhere or off in the future. Mostly he talks of it as something that is emerging among us, ready to be lived, right now.

But if the kingdom of God is an emerging culture of love and mercy and peace, I'm not finding too many reports of its emergence when I turn on the news. Are you? It seems that wannabe leaders can generate a lot more support by fuelling hostility and promising to put up walls to keep out the poor, the refugees, the orphaned, and the traumatised. The political experts obviously don't see too many votes in an emerging culture of open-frontiered love and hospitality. Those who advocate love and mercy are seen, at best, as naive bleeding hearts, and at worst, as misfits and traitors who give comfort and support to the enemy. Such a stance can be so unpopular as to be downright dangerous.

The reading we heard from the letter to the Hebrews more explicitly addresses the question of what it looks like to live a life of faith in a hostile world, and it does, in fact, include the idea that we will live as strangers and foreigners on the earth, rather than as those who would be seen as loyal and patriotic citizens of any nation on earth. The letter illustrates this from the lives of a series of the ancient hebrew saints, and tonight we just heard the bit focussed on Abraham and Sarah. They are among the clearest examples of this strangers and foreigners idea, because they left their homeland at the call of God, and set out for a promised land that they knew nothing about.

Although this could be seen as supporting the approach that simply ignores this world and waits for a better world to come, the emphasis of the story actually falls on their faithfulness in following in the here and now. The future hope is important, but its importance is more in its power to sustain their faithfulness in the face of uncertainty and hostility on the present journey.

So Abraham and Sarah, rather than just retreating into a world of heavenly minded escapism, are more like those who accept the diagnosis of a mortally sick world and commit themselves to taking the medicine. They know that it will first make things worse, as it often does. For them, it means the loss of all the comforts of home and all the security of belonging to family, tribe and nation. It means journeying on, faithfully following the call, but never knowing where it will lead.

When Jesus calls us to follow him, he doesn't promise a salvation that will suddenly bring health, peace, popularity and prosperity. He told us that we would be hated and rejected and denounced as traitors. Take up your cross was meant literally as well as figuratively. It's tough medicine, and to stomach it, you've got to have faith that the remedy is really what the world needs.

The need to have faith in the final outcome reminds us that those other two approaches I spoke of were by no means 100% wrong. Saving the world from itself is not something we

can accomplish ourselves, even if we can play our little part. And playing our little part does include worshipping well, and waiting and trusting for something that is yet to come.

But more importantly, it means putting one foot in front of the other in a faithful quest to find the pathway of life and love right here and right now. It means beginning to practice the culture of love and mercy and radical hospitality right now, even in the face of hatred and reprisals and violent exclusion. In practice that will often provoke hostility, precisely when our love and mercy is extended to whoever the object of popular hatred is at any given moment – asylum seekers, muslims, indigenous people, GLBTI people.

We don't practice love and mercy because it instantly makes us feel good. It's not a quick fix or a recipe for happiness and prosperity. As often as not, love will be rejected by everyone, even the recipients of it who most need it. Practicing radical love and hospitality will, for the most part, simply make us misfits and strangers and objects of suspicion.

But in the end, the only alternative is to conform and fit in with the ways of a world that is insanely hell-bent on self-destruction; to continue being part of the problem rather than take the medicine and start living as part of the solution. And even though, like Abraham and Sarah and the other ancient hebrew heroes, we will in all likelihood reach the end of our lives without having seen the promises fulfilled, we continue on the way because we have glimpsed from a distance a world made whole in the image of Jesus.

Some of the early church leaders described the Eucharist as the medicine of life. In a few minutes, we will be gathered around this table and the one who has shown us just how painful it can be to drink the full cup of that medicine will be here among us, inviting us to eat and drink with him again. And if we will take that medicine at his hands, we too may catch a glimpse of a coming healed world in which self-sacrificing love has emerged as the new healthy normal and those who live by it are right at home.