

Why you probably don't need to learn more

A sermon on Luke 6:39-49 by Nathan Nettleton, 3 March 2019

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Message

Acknowledging and appreciating Jesus is relatively easy, but we find it much more difficult to transform our lives in conformity with his teaching.

Sermon

Tonight, immediately after this short sermon, we will be celebrating an infant presentation rite for young Lior. Infant presentation rites and infant baptism rites are often seen as just celebrating the arrival of a lovely baby, but these rites are intended as parts of a process of Christian initiation, a process of being inducted into the life and faith of the community of the followers of Jesus.

Churches like ours don't baptise babies because we believe that the commitment to follow Jesus is not something that we can impose on anyone else, or decide for anyone else, so our rite is more specifically understood as launching a process of invitation. What we can do is commit ourselves to passing on the faith to Lior, in both our words and our actions, living it with courage and joy so that he might see it and recognise it as the pathway to life in all its fullness. Obviously we will bless Lior and pray for him tonight too, but the promises or vows are all about what we will do, not about what he will do.

And tonight, by coincidence, the words we heard from Jesus in the gospel reading speak quite directly to this. They opened with questions about what it takes to lead one another on the path of faith, and closed with a picture of laying down firm foundations to live by.

These sayings are the conclusion to a great sermon from Jesus, the rest of which we heard over the last two Sundays. It opened with the beatitudes – blessed are those who are poor, hungry, weeping, and persecuted, and woe to those who are prosperous, well fed, contented, and popular. Then last week we heard the call to be loving and merciful in ways that are generally regarded as absurd, irresponsible and even impossible by most people – loving and blessing even those who despise us and are determined to ruin our lives.

Then tonight we hear Jesus ask, “What's the point of calling me 'Lord' if you're not going to follow what I say? If you want to lay a foundation that will hold you when the going gets tough, you can't just hear my words, you've got to act on them, put them into practice.”

In its context then, this call to put Jesus's words into practice relates specifically to what we had just heard: turning our backs on very things that most of the world aspires to – prosperity, comfort, happiness and popularity – and breaking free of the endless cycle of treating others the way they treat us, and instead showering love and mercy on all regardless of what they do.

So with that in mind, let's take a quick tour through the images Jesus uses to make this point in tonight's reading.

He begins with a proverb or saying that is so catchy that it is still used today: the blind leading the blind. It's no use the blind leading the blind, Jesus says. They will both end up in the ditch. Now Robert could probably tell us that people with visual impairments learn a lot from one

another, and as Lior grows up and learns to cope with his hearing impairment, I'm sure he will benefit greatly from the wisdom and guidance of others who have lived with similar conditions for longer. But in a way, that just proves the point. In a good guide, you want someone who has gone this way before and can see where both they and you are going.

I once witnessed an epic fail by a guide dog who walked straight under a road worker's barricade and so crashed his handler into it. Those dogs are trained not to walk under anything less than the height of their handler, but clearly the dog lost concentration for a moment and stuffed up. I'm a dog trainer in my leisure time, so I know that just like us, dogs are never perfect, and probably that dog got it right 98% of the time. But in that moment, it was the blindly distracted leading the blind.

Jesus too knows that even the best teachers and guides are not going to get it right 100% of the time, but he warns us to avoid taking our lead from those who aren't putting the words into action.

Then he goes on to say that the disciple or apprentice is unlikely to get any better than their teacher, but if the teacher does a really good job, they might catch up. Liesl is an extremely accomplished musician, and most musicians who have got to be as good as her have gone through several teachers by the time they get there. It is not usually the most accomplished teachers who are teaching the beginners, so the most gifted students end up having to move onto another teacher once they reach a level that begins to exhaust the expertise of their teacher. All being well, all of us will have things we can teach Lior as he grows, but none of us are masters of everything, and we hope and pray that others can teach him what we haven't yet learned to put into practice ourselves.

Next comes another of Jesus's more memorable and humorous word pictures: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbour's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye?" Or in other words, "what are you doing judging other people's faults when you haven't got your own house in order?" I've been reading some of the teachings of the early desert fathers and mothers recently, and some of them used to say that if you are giving proper attention to addressing your own faults and your own needs to change and grow, then you probably won't even be noticing those of anyone else. Certainly, if we think about what sort of person we hope Lior will grow to become, I've no doubt that we'd all rather he followed our example on the days when we are properly taking responsibility for our own behaviours and our own growth than the days when we are being picky, judgemental and self-righteous.

The next saying really gets to the root of the issue. "No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit." Children are very good at spotting frauds. We could give Lior all the good teaching in the world, but if the fruit he sees us producing is self-righteous, judgemental and divisive, it will be the fruit, not the words, that make the biggest impact on him.

Which is why Jesus sums up his message here by asking, "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I tell you?" Probably nowhere has this been more apparent than in relation to what Jesus teaches in this sermon about loving those who despise us, turning the other cheek, giving generously to all, and refusing to crush our enemies. Most of us fall short here. I know I do. I know I've put a lot more energy into researching elaborate theories about

what these words of Jesus meant in their original context than I have into working out how to put them into practice in my own life.

I'm not criticising careful study of these words, but when it doesn't lead on to practice, to producing good fruit, it is simply self-indulgence. All that study is a bit like going to the gym. If you spend an hour a day working out in the gym, in that hour, you haven't produced anything of value for anyone. But if you take your increased fitness and strength and put them to work in gracious service of others, then the work-out was totally worth it (thanks to Bruxy Cavey for this illustration). Similarly, you can study the Bible and the teachings of Jesus until you know them inside out, but it will be nothing but mental masturbation unless you then put them into practice in a life that is loving, liberating and reconciling.

We hope to see Lior's young life built on a solid foundation, and the best contribution we can make to that is to model lives built on solid foundations. And Jesus is quite clear in his final illustration that strong foundations are not laid down by accumulating more and more words, more and more fine teachings, but by putting the words and teachings of Jesus into practice. As long as there is a gap between our words and our practice, learning more words will only make the gap worse.

There will, unavoidably be more words now as we celebrate this presentation rite with Lior, but let them not be mere words. Let us work and pray to be a people who Lior will see turning these words into a rich shared life of mercy, grace and liberating life.