

# The Kingdom Suffers

*A sermon on Matthew 11:7-15 by Nathan Nettleton, 15 December 2019*

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## Message

The coming kingdom culture confronts the world's violence by redemptively suffering and absorbing it, not by reciprocating it with even greater violence.

## Sermon

In case you haven't heard, we have recently begun what is intended to be a one year departure from the lectionary that usually sets the Bible readings that we hear in worship. The aim, if I can sustain the extra work required for the year, is to hear and consider many of the interesting passages of scripture that didn't make the final cut and so are almost never preached on and are only read and known by those of you who regularly read the Bible at home.

Sometimes you have to wonder why some of these missing passages were left out in the first place. Tonight's gospel reading is a case in point. The first half of it is, in fact, included in the lectionary, and the second half seems so potentially important that one wonders why the lectionary didn't just extend the reading to include the extra few verses.

So what we heard, and have heard before, was Jesus speaking to the crowds about John the baptiser after some of John's followers had come from John to ask whether Jesus was really the one, or whether they should still be waiting for someone else. And then what we heard, and haven't usually heard before, was the conclusion of Jesus's comments where he says that "the kingdom of heaven is always copping the violence as violent people try to take it over by force."

It is possible to argue that this is the most important verse in the whole of Matthew's gospel because it provides the key for interpreting many of the parables and stories that Matthew includes. But it is also true that its interpretation is complicated and disputed, and perhaps that is why the lectionary compilers decided to leave it out. It was just too hard.

I think it is hugely important, and all the more so at this time of year as we stand on tip toes and crane our necks to try to make out the nature of the kingdom of God that is on the horizon and fast approaching. What is it that we are expecting? It is the same question that the followers of John asked that prompted these words from Jesus. When they asked, "Are you the one, or should we still be expecting another?", the point of the question was about the shape of those expectations. "You don't seem to be the sort of messianic king we thought we were expecting, so did we have that wrong, or is there someone else coming who will fulfil those expectations?"

Before I get into outlining why I think Jesus's answer is so important, I need to be fair and acknowledge the difficulty of translating this passage. The difficulty can be readily seen when we compare two translations that have gone in different directions with it.

The NRSV says: "the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force."

But the NIV says, “the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it.” They could have even said “the kingdom of heaven has been violently advancing.” The meanings are pretty much opposites. Does the kingdom suffer the violence, or inflict the violence?

You might reasonably wonder how this could happen. Some of the translation problems in the Bible are because different early copies of the books have used different words, but this is not one of those. In this one it is simply an ambiguous word. For the language buffs among you, it is a problem where in Greek, two different conjugations of the verb have the same form, but different meanings. The NRSV has interpreted it as being in the passive voice, and the NIV has interpreted it as being in the middle voice. The spelling can't solve it for us, so it becomes a theological question: which meaning makes more sense in the context of the whole gospel?

If you are thinking that Greek must be a pretty dumb language if it can leave such opposite meanings possible, have a look at this line of English:

*The coach has resigned.*

If you saw that headline without knowing anything of the background, you might have to read further to find out whether the coach has resigned for another three years in charge, or has resigned, effective immediately, to take up a position elsewhere. Language is a funny thing, and we often write things down without realising how ambiguous they might seem to later readers who are more removed from the immediate context.

Although I'm a bit of a language junkie, I'm not going to bore you further with the complexities of the middle voice/passive voice argument. Suffice it to say that almost every English translation that I can find goes with the passive voice – “the kingdom of heaven suffers violence” – and even the NIV has repented of their decision to go the other way. Their 2011 revision has changed it to line up with everyone else.

So, if we take that question as settled, what does it mean? Why is it potentially so important?

Well, the context here gives us a big clue. We can hear it implied in the question that Jesus is responding to, the question asked by the disciples of John the baptiser: “Are you the one who was to come, or should we still be expecting another?” You see, behind that question lies some confusion about expectations. John had preached about a coming one who would arrive with a flame thrower in hand to set fire to the earth and incinerate God's enemies. And Jesus certainly wasn't living up to that expectation. He might have had some pretty fiery words at times, but he consistently advocated a merciful non-violence that turned the other cheek rather than brought down violent judgement in the name of God. “What happened to the fire?” John wants to know.

So Jesus's response is saying, “If you were expecting fire and violent judgement, you'll see it alright, but you'll see it directed at me, not generated by me. You've been misreading the law and the prophets if you thought they meant that God's messiah would be dealing out the violence. Since the beginning, the kingdom of God is always copping the violence as violent people try to take it over by force.”

When Jesus talks about there having been no one greater than John, and yet the least in the kingdom being greater than John, he is clearly identifying John, or perhaps the transition moment between John and himself, as a kind of tipping point. There was the time that ended with John, and there is the coming future which begins now. And if you are still waiting for a messiah who will deal out violent punishment on God's enemies, you are still stuck in the old way of thinking that has come to an end with John. Jesus is clear that the new way of thinking is not entirely new. It has been there in the law and prophets all along for those who have ears to hear. The suffering servant passages in the prophet Isaiah are the most explicit, and Jesus quotes them often.

The question from John's disciples is perfectly understandable though, isn't it? If the problem of all of history is that the small and vulnerable are always suffering the violence of the powerful, what comfort is there in the promise of a messiah and a messianic kingdom that will align itself so completely with the small and vulnerable that it simply becomes the latest target of that violence? Surely a violent avenger would be what we would prefer!

Well, when I said before that this line is in the passive voice, that was just a linguistic technical term and it does not mean that Jesus is being passive. If you were at our workshop on non-violent resistance a couple of months ago, you will remember that we touched on the difference between being passive in the face of violence, and taking decisive creative non-violent action in the face of that violence.

Jesus does not suffer the violence simply because he is too weak and beaten down to do anything else. He is not a passive victim who meekly resigns to his suffering because he has no capacity to do anything else.

As we see later when he is arrested, tried and executed, Jesus actively chooses to face and suffer the violence. He had plenty of opportunities to compromise and walk away to save his skin. He also makes the comment himself that he could have called down an army of angels if winning by force was the aim of his game. But Jesus makes the choice to face the injustice and violence, and to absorb its sting. It is a strong and courageous choice.

But why make that choice? There are probably any number of ways of answering that question, so let me summarise just a few main ones.

Firstly, Jesus suffers the violence to save others from it. Don't over-spiritualise this, because those who do usually fall back into the trap of implying that the violence we are saved from comes from God, and what Jesus is saying here is precisely the opposite: God suffers violence; God does not inflict it. Jesus suffers violence in order to save others from it in the same way that we often hear stories after mass shootings and the like of people who have used their own bodies to shield others from the bullets. And Jesus does this in that particularly active form that you most often see from birds protecting a nest, by advancing and provoking the aggressor in order to distract them and lure them away. Jesus provocatively invites the hostility and violence upon himself so that we might get away safely.

Secondly, by publicly facing up to the violence without reciprocating it, Jesus unmasks it, exposes it for all to see. This is a particularly powerful way of confronting and disempowering violent injustice. We saw a powerful illustration of it in India in 1930 in the Salt March led by Mahatma Gandhi to expose the injustice and violence of the British occupation. The

international news reports describing British soldiers clubbing down unarmed protesters who kept marching doggedly forward without even raising their hands to fend off the blows caught the attention of the world, shifting public opinion, and greatly emboldening the ordinary Indian people. British commanders admitted to being confounded by the power of the non-violent action, and said that they much preferred facing violent opponents.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly in the context of tonight's gospel reading, by actively suffering the violence, Jesus is modelling the culture of the incoming kingdom of heaven. "The kingdom of heaven is always suffering the violence as violent people try to take it over by force." Jesus knows that violence only begets more violence. No matter how legitimate the authority that deals it out, the supposedly "legitimate" use of violence simply legitimates the use of violence and so fosters a growing culture of violence. And that is not the culture of the kingdom of God. The culture of the kingdom, by contrast, is a culture of confrontational love and powerful mercy.

As we stand here in the season of Advent, and anticipate a world made new by the inbreaking of the culture of heaven, these words of Jesus are just so important in shaping our expectations, and consequently in shaping our attitudes and actions as we face a hostile world. The kingdom for which we watch and pray is the kingdom of the suffering servant. And no matter how much this violent power-mongering world tries to take charge of the kingdom and force its values and style back into the mould of the world's status quo, the kingdom of the suffering servant will soak up the hostility and stand firm in the power of love.

And if there be any doubt, look to the central symbol of this season – the hope of the world embodied in the fragile promise of a baby yet unborn.