

Hard Discipline

A sermon on Isaiah 5:1-7; Hebrews 11:29 - 12:2; & Luke 12:49-56 by Nathan Nettleton, 14 August 2022

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Message

Adversity, violence, and suffering can come as a consequence of not just sin, but of radical love, but with love it can strengthen and sharpen us for fullness of life.

Sermon

Early in the week, I thought I knew where I was going with this sermon. The fire and judgement in today's readings seemed to be inviting a sequel to my recent sermon on the terrifying texts from Hosea, to develop the theme a bit more fully. Besides, I had had an interesting conversation online with another preacher who was asking good challenging questions about the line I took in that last sermon, so that had kept my thoughts developing, and I felt ready to go.

But then I noticed something strange about today's readings. It is still related to this question of judgement, so I haven't abandoned my initial plan, but it has taken it off into unexpected territory.

Let me read out again a couple of selected bits from today's readings, and see if something strikes you as strange like it did to me.

In the first bit, the prophet Isaiah depicts the people of God as a vineyard from whom God was expecting a rich crop of justice and righteousness, but instead they brought forth bloodshed and misery. So through the prophet, God says:

I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard.
I will remove its hedge,
and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall,
and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste;
... overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds
that they rain no rain upon it. (Isaiah 5: 5-6)

So the prophet's words are fairly clear. The people will suffer as a result of their sin, their producing of bloodshed and misery instead of righteousness. Standard fare in the Biblical prophets.

Now listen to this extract from the letter to the Hebrews:

Some of them were tortured. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. (Hebrews 11:35-38)

That too sounds like it could have come from a fiery judgement passage from one of the prophets describing the disasters inflicted on the people for their sins; a people reaping the consequences of the evils they have sown. It sounds like it could have come from Jeremiah's Lamentations over the fate of sinful Jerusalem. It could have, but it didn't.

This second one is actually a summary description of a group of the great heroes of the faith, the saints of God, who we are being urged to admire and emulate.

At the end of a roll-call of past heroes who are examples to us of great faith in action, the writer to the Hebrews says, "I could go on, there are so many more who did amazing things because of their faith," and then he summarises, saying, "Some were tortured. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword, etc. etc."

So on the one hand we have the prophets thundering out warnings of adversity, violence, and suffering to try to motivate the people to repent and change and do the right thing, even if only to avoid becoming a victim of such consequences, but on the other hand we are told that being a victim of adversity, violence, and suffering can be a consequence of being a great example of faith, righteousness, and all-embracing love. Jesus, of course, was the number one example – the one who is perfectly loving, perfectly merciful, and perfectly good ends up publicly and gruesomely tortured to death on a cross.

How are we to make any sense of this?

Well, firstly, as I said in my last sermon, the Bible does not express a single consistent understanding of judgement. Part of the reason it is so important for us to keep reading and listening to the whole Bible, even the parts that are most difficult, is that what we are seeing here is a long conversation that keeps evolving. If you just skip to the end and read only the words of Jesus on the topic, you wouldn't be able to grasp the full significance of what he is saying, because so much of what Jesus says is said in conversation with that older material that you'd skipped over, and so it would be like listening to someone having a conversation on the phone when you can't hear the other end. It is hard to form a clear picture from one half of a conversation.

Many of the older judgment passages in the Hebrew Bible are grounded in a belief that absolutely everything that happens is directly controlled by God, and this went hand in hand with the belief that God consistently rewarded the good and punished the bad. Therefore, if things went well for you, it was indisputable proof that God was blessing you, and so you were a good person, beloved by God. And by the same token, if disaster befell a person, a town, or a nation, it was indisputable proof that God was punishing them, and therefore they were evil and deserved what hit them.



This past week, there was [a disastrous fire in the biggest oil storage facility in Cuba](#). I've been quite preoccupied with it because it was in the city of Matanzas where I have been twice and have wonderful friends. I've preached at the Baptist church there, and the only reason that we haven't yet had their

pastor, Orestes Roca, preaching for us is that internet access is so poor in Cuba that it would be impossible to do a live connection and difficult to even get a prerecorded video out. I haven't given up though. It will happen.

This picture, taken from the balcony of the church, makes the fire look like its just in the next street. It is actually about 4 or 5 kilometres away, so what it really shows you is how big it was.

Matanzas is a lot smaller than Melbourne, so to get a sense of the impact of this fire on the city, imagine what it would be like for us if the whole Altona oil refinery district blew up and the fire raged out of control for days. When



you look at images of this week's disaster while reading some of the apocalyptic judgement passages in the Bible, it is not hard to imagine how people in ancient times would have responded. In fact, given the hostility towards Cuba in the USA, I'd bet that there are preachers there even now who are declaring this to be God's judgement on an evil godless communist nation.

But let's put a human face on it. This is Elier Correa, a brave 24 year old professional firefighter. He trained for the job he loved at the National

Firefighters' School in Havana. Just over a week ago, he contacted his mother to tell her that he was at the front of the line fighting this fire, but that he wasn't afraid. No doubt he was trying to assure her that she needn't be afraid for him either. Elier died last Thursday from injuries received not long after messaging his mum, I think when the second tank blew up.



So was Elier's death in this apocalyptic fireball proof that he was a worse sinner than most, and that God was punishing him and his family and his city? Many in ancient Biblical times would have said yes – God is sovereign and is controlling everything, and so if disaster befalls a person or a town or a nation, it is indisputable proof that God was punishing them.

Now I say “indisputable”, but of course, this was not indisputable, even then. Long before Jesus, there was already a lot of dispute about this, and much of it is recorded in the pages of the Hebrew Bible. While many of these judgement passages are grounded in that assumption, alongside them we have voices of protest. Many of the psalms voice this directly. They cry out saying “God, if it is true that you always reward the good and punish the evil, how come I’m seeing evil people prospering and good people suffering?”

The book of Job is a sustained argument about exactly this. After being wiped out in a disaster, Job continues to protest his innocence and maintain that he is suffering unjustly, and at the end of the book, God says that it is Job who has spoken the truth, not his accusers who claimed to be defending God.

Jesus openly rejects the idea that suffering is proof of guilt. Hearing news of a disaster, he says “Do you think this tower collapsed and crushed those people because they were worse sinners than everyone else? No I tell you.” As we might say now, shit happens. Whether you are good or bad, shit happens. But then Jesus immediately says, “but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.” (Luke 13:4-5)

So is he contradicting himself on the spot? I don’t think he is, but I do get the confusion.

There are plenty of cases where Jesus does appear to be repeating some of those same judgement themes that we hear in the prophets. In fact Jesus draws on the rebellious vineyard imagery that we heard tonight from the prophet Isaiah in several of his parables. And certainly tonight we heard Jesus saying, “I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!” which is a pretty uncomfortable choice of words for those of us who have been following the news from Matanzas this week. “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?” Jesus asks. “No, I tell you, but rather division!”

So it is quite easy to read many of these sayings of Jesus as perfectly in keeping with the older prophetic traditions that threatened disaster and suffering as God’s punishment on those who refused to repent and follow God’s ways.

But when we examine his words more closely, and pay attention to the context and to the older biblical images he is drawing on, we frequently find something else going on. We find Jesus employing these sayings and images that the people were so familiar with, but subverting them from within. Often when a prophet like Jesus employs a well known story or theme, it is not the familiar elements that carry the main point, it is the unexpected alterations.

Any of you who have tried to make alterations when reading a favourite story to a child will recognise this. If your child’s favourite story is Sleeping Beauty and one day you decide to improve your child’s education by tweaking the story to say that the Prince didn’t kiss Sleeping Beauty because she was unconscious and couldn’t give consent, don’t expect a delighted thank you. Howls of outrage are more likely. They often were for Jesus too.

So when we look again, we see that Jesus didn’t say, “but unless you repent of your godless ways, you will all be punished by God just as they were.” He says, “but unless you change track, you will all perish just as those killed by the collapsing tower did.” Put that in the context of 1st century Israel where the Roman occupation forces were becoming more and more pissed off with the constant guerrilla resistance by Jewish nationalists, and what Jesus’s

words sound like is “unless you stop this madness, you’ll have something a lot bigger than a collapsing tower coming down on your heads.”

So has none of this got anything to do with the judgement of God then? Yes, it does. But what Jesus seems to be doing is helping us to unravel the related but not identical concepts of judgement and punishment. God judges between right and wrong, declaring some things right and others wrong. God judges that some things are crazy and self-destructive, and other things contribute to peace and hope. God judges that some of us, by our choices and behaviour are part of the problem, and others are part of the solution, and God calls us to choose between the two.

Punishment is another question altogether, and by separating it from judgement and rejecting the idea that every disaster is an act of God, Jesus is liberating us from the otherwise inescapable conclusion that God is a monster.

And of course, this isn’t just something that Jesus teaches; it’s something he lived to the full. The ultimate disproof of the belief that coming to a disastrous end was proof of sin being punished is the sight of Jesus, the Prince of love and peace, dying an agonising death on the cross. So why would any of us think we can follow in the footsteps of Jesus and expect it to solve our difficulties and give us a long life of popularity and success?

And that’s where we circle back to the strange paradox I noted at the start. Disaster and suffering might not be evidence that sin is being punished, but they can be consequences of the paths we take. There’s random stuff, and then there’s direct consequences. Random stuff happens to everyone, whereas consequences come as a direct result of someone’s choices and behaviours. But, and it’s a very big but, disaster and suffering can be consequences of taking the godly path of love and peace just as much as they can be consequences of malevolently sowing seeds of division and destruction.

As we hear Jesus say tonight, his life and teaching bring division. Some people embrace his way. Other people reject his way. And the rejection can be ferocious and violent, because his call to renounce vengeance and love our enemies, when it is actually put into practice, is seen as treacherous, as betraying our families, our mates, our communities, our tribes, our nations, and even our understanding of justice. If you think that sounds overstated, try speaking up for peace in Russia, or for loving your enemies in Ukraine, and see what sort of consequences you cop.

Being the victim of hatred and persecution can happen to anyone, so in itself it doesn’t tell us anything about whether you are a bad person or perhaps even an exceptionally good person. Disaster and suffering do not prove that God is punishing or disciplining us, *or* that we belong in the roll-call of heroic saints.

But here’s the thing. Those heroes on that roll-call of faith were not people who sat around whinging about how unfair everything was. They were people who embraced their suffering as a way of disciplining themselves to achieve even more in the name of love and peace, in the name of Jesus. In the passage we heard, the writer uses the image of athletes preparing for and competing in gruelling sporting competition, and we often talk about the hardships that athletes put themselves through to get the very best out of themselves, to reach the peak of their potential.

Knowing the people I know in Matanzas, I have no doubt that they will emerge from the pain and grief of last week stronger and more united and committed to love and care for one another. And if we get serious about following Jesus, there is no reason to expect that the consequences will go better for us than they did for him, so add that kind of suffering consequences to the random disasters that can befall any of us, and we too will have plenty of opportunities to allow God to work with us, in and through hardship and suffering, to refine us and strengthen us and shape us in the image of Jesus.

This sermon, despite being too long, still feels incomplete to me, but I think that's okay, because the truth is that the most important aspects of this message are not so much for preaching as they are for praying around our Lord's table and for living out in the journey of faith that lies before us.