

## Sermon, St Marks Northbridge, 12<sup>th</sup> Sep 2021 Matthew 9:14-17

### 1. When life is disrupted

Some changes in life are incremental – almost indiscernible. Aging's an obvious one. I've been getting accustomed to the gradual emergence of grey hairs – although I was happy to read in Proverbs 18 in our HG during the week that grey hair is a *crown of splendour*! Learning to drive, losing weight, improving at your hobbies – they're all incremental changes too.

But some changes aren't incremental at all are they? They're disruptive. The kind of changes where life's never the same again. Technology can do this. Like the invention of the integrated circuit which turned our world of big clunky appliances and devices into tiny, compact ones that could fit in your pocket, and even in your body. Or the internet that brought connection between people at a scale and speed that had never been experienced before. But disruptive change can also be personal – and that's the type we most remember. Like the loss of someone that leaves an irreplaceable void and grief. Getting married, having children. The breakdown of a significant relationship. Acute or chronic illness. All of these circumstances and experiences can fundamentally change us and the nature of life from that point on. They can be good things or hard things but they have in common that they disrupt life.

I think disrupted life is at the heart of the passage we're looking at today. And it's because Jesus is at the heart of the passage. Jesus is a lot of things – but He's definitely disruptive – as those listening to him in Matthew's account were discovering. I used to run with a fellow who was exploring Christianity and we'd chat about his questions. One day he said to me, "I'm not yet convinced about Jesus, but I can see from the Bible that if I was convinced, He would make a massive difference to my life." He was absolutely right.

Jesus is disruptive – and it's important that we work out what this means for our own lives. That's where today's passage can help us. Let me read it:

<sup>14</sup> Then John's disciples came and asked him, "How is it that we and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?" <sup>15</sup> Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them; then they will fast. <sup>16</sup> "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. <sup>17</sup> Neither do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved."

We'll unpack the passage under the 3 headings on the outline. First, "Disruption now", v14-15.

## 2. Disruption now (v14-15)

The occasion is a party at Matthew's house. Remember last week we saw Matthew meet Jesus and it changed his life. He left behind his old life of greed and self-determination as a tax collector and committed himself to Jesus. That was the reason for the party: to celebrate the forgiveness Matthew and others like him had received from Jesus.

And while at the table, you might recall that Jesus was asked a question, in v11: *"Why do you eat with people like this – tax collectors and sinners?"* Now, He's asked a follow-up question, v14: *"How is it that we [John's disciples] and the Pharisees fast often, but your disciples do not fast?"* In other words, if the first question was, *"Why do you eat with them?"*, this follow-up question is, *"Why are you eating at all?"* And it wasn't a random question. All Jews observed a prescribed fast on the Day of Atonement, but some devout Jews – John's disciples and the Pharisees included – observed a twice-weekly fast. This is what the questioners are referring to. In any case, the question was loaded and pointed – because Jesus was mid-feast!

So what's He going to say? Seems He's been caught red-handed. After all, here He is feasting with His disciples while others are fasting. How could this be right? Surely it'd be more godly and pious to deny oneself rather than fill oneself? Well that conclusion couldn't be further from the truth according to Jesus. Notice his reply in v15: *"How can the guests of the bridegroom mourn while he is with them? The time will come when the bridegroom will be taken away from them; then they will fast."*

Jesus here is unmistakably talking about Himself as the 'bridegroom' and His disciples as the bridegroom's 'guests'. And he returns their question with a question of His own: How could my disciples *mourn while I'm here?*

Jesus acknowledges that fasting in the Bible is often accompanied by sadness. For example, sadness over sin and its effects (like when the Israelites assembled at Mizpah to fight the Philistines in 1 Sam 7), sorrowful repentance (like the Ninevites after Jonah preaches to them in Jonah 3), times of great loss or longing (as when David prayed for his sick son in 2 Sam 12, and Nehemiah wept over the remains of Jerusalem). In such times, the deprivation of food was a tangible humbling of oneself before God on whom you depended for forgiveness, rescue, health, deliverance, encouragement.

The presence of a bridegroom, though, is unquestionably a time for celebration, not sadness. How on earth could "God With Us" be a time of mourning? As Ecclesiastes 3:4 says – *"There's a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance"* – and right now, while I'm here, Jesus says, it's a time for joy and celebration. And rightly so. Because here were people – outsiders, little people, hopeless, hated, sinners – who through the mercy of God had been forgiven by Jesus Christ and given a seat at the table of fellowship with God Himself. This little party at Matthew's house was nothing less than a reflection of the great heavenly banquet at which all of God's forgiven people will partake. So it was a gathering at which nothing but smiles, laughter and perhaps tears of joy were appropriate. Sadness, grumpiness, anger, tears of mourning – not at this gathering. The only sounds emanating from this house were a melody of hope and joy.

Unfortunately, John's disciples and the Pharisees hadn't recognised that Jesus was the Messianic Bridegroom. Their continuing to fast while Jesus was with them was in fact the evidence of their refusal of Jesus. His arrival ought to have disrupted their fasting. Instead, it hadn't made any difference to them. Jesus wasn't at the centre of their worship, because if He had been, they would've been celebrating at the table along with Matthew. At the end of the day, they wouldn't let Him disrupt their worship of God because they didn't accept Him. Though Jesus made all the difference in the world, they carried on as if He made none. And this was a huge mistake.

### 3. Disruption from *now on* (v16-17)

But there's more. Because Jesus wants His hearers to grasp that Him being *disruptive* is bigger than fasting. You see, Jesus would eventually leave them and fasting would return – as He predicts in v15 – but the *disruption* He causes was here to stay. It was from *now on*, and it affects the whole of life and spirituality. He makes this point using two illustrations – and this is our third point on the outline.

Both illustrations, you'll notice, involve something *new* – the new patch of cloth and the new wine – and something *old* – the worn garment and the aged skin for holding wine. Jesus says that in both cases, trying to 'fit' the new thing to the old thing is not going to work. The new cloth patch will shrink and tear a bigger hole in the garment than before; and the new wine will burst the old wineskin leaving you with neither wineskin or wine.

What does He mean? Well the two illustrations are really about *incompatibility*, and they're meant to reveal the truth that with Jesus comes something disruptively 'new'. The old garment of Judaism was worn. But Jesus wasn't simply a 'patch', as if he were mending a worn-out religion. Nor could His newness – symbolised as new wine here – somehow be contained or incorporated into Judaism. Treating Him like this would wreck both: they'd fail to honour their OT obligations that only Jesus could fulfil and they'd fail to honour Jesus as Lord and Christ. New wine requires a new wineskin.

No, Jesus is no patch. He's a radical part of God's plan. He creates a discontinuity in life and spirituality because now *He* becomes the focus of worship. This is disruptive. With Jesus' arrival, it's impossible to maintain the religious status quo. It's impossible because of *who He is*. Note that Jesus wasn't rejecting Judaism and the OT. But He was fulfilling it! He was bringing to fruition the ancient purposes and promises of God – that all peoples could be blessed.

And these metaphors of new clothes and wine aren't arbitrary. These are symbols of the heavenly feast, the wedding banquet of the saved. And with the arrival of Jesus we discover that this great feast can only happen because of Him. He saves. He enables the heavenly feast.

The bottom line here is that Jesus is no *accessory*. He's the radical and vital part of God's salvation plan. Not an option, not an add-on, not an add-in. This was precisely the mistake many of the Pharisees and others were making. At worst they were rejecting Him; at best they were trying to 'fit' Him into their way of worshipping God. Neither would do. Neither will work.

#### 4. Living the disrupted life

Well, what does all this have to do with us? Lots I think! Let's finish with 3 ways this passage speaks to us today. This is point 4 on your outline: "Living the disrupted life".

- (i) First, if Jesus hasn't **disrupted your life and spirituality**, then you're at odds with the truth of this passage. That's because Jesus is both the means and the object of true spirituality. At worst we can ignore that fact. But neither will paying Him lip service do. And neither can Jesus be retro-fitted to what's ultimately our own tailor-made view of the world.

Whether the fasting of John's disciples and the Pharisees represented an ugly self-righteousness, or an admirable piety, is really beside the point. Because either way, Jesus wasn't at the centre of their worship. Jesus' rightful place is at the centre of our spirituality and worship. And He has to disrupt everything and everyone – including us – from that place.

When Nicolaus Copernicus discovered that the planets actually orbited the sun and not the earth, this wasn't new information that could simply tweak the old model. And it also wasn't information that could be ignored. No – now everything revolved around the sun. The sun was at the centre and the earth could no longer occupy that place. Likewise, the Son ("S", "O", "N") occupies the centre of life and spirituality, and everything revolves around Him.

Many things can push Jesus from His rightful place at the centre: unbelief – pride and hypocrisy – reluctance to lose our autonomy – fear – hurt – disbelief that Jesus could love and forgive someone with our track record.

But this passage teaches us that Jesus must disrupt even these things. Because Jesus is Lord.

- (ii) The second thing to say is that disruption is often **unsettling**. You can bet your bottom dollar that John's disciples and the Pharisees – if they'd really grasped what Jesus was saying here – would have felt most uncomfortable. The night I became a Christian I remember feeling a sweat-causing panic as it dawned on me the disruption of Jesus I'd failed to see for 17 years. That soon turned to thankfulness as I grasped what He'd saved me from – but the evening was nevertheless 'wrenching'.

But even as Christians, saved and secured by Christ, there's an unsettling aspect to His Lordship. Spending time in this passage has highlighted for me some areas of personal godliness where I've been growing a bit complacent. It's been unsettling to be reminded freshly that Jesus needs to be at the centre of these areas too, like all other areas of life. Perhaps you and I could try to make it a regular prayer to pray that Jesus would put on our hearts the areas where we ought to feel His unsettling, uncompromising Lordship more acutely.

In making this point, I'm not suggesting that unsettled is the chief emotion Christians should feel. I'm simply saying that, at some level, disruptive Jesus ought to be unsettling because of *who He is*, and because complacency with Him is not an option.

**(iii)** And thirdly, having our lives disrupted by Jesus is ultimately the **place of joy**. Remember where all this was happening – Matthew's party! For those who welcomed Jesus as Lord, there were no regrets. Because now at the centre of their lives was one who loved them with an everlasting, unfailing, forgiving love. Yes - Jesus is disruptive! But there's no better disruption. Wouldn't you rather be disrupted and safe, than despise Jesus' disruption and perish? Wouldn't you rather be disrupted and loved unfailingly, than ignore Jesus' disruption and forfeit that love. Wouldn't you rather be disrupted and know you're serving the Lord's Messiah, than disregard Jesus' disruption and serve yourself? Wouldn't you?

Let's pray.

### **Reflection Questions**

In what ways has Jesus disrupted your life? Are there any ways you think He should be disrupting your life more?