Westlake Church Lausanne

Rest for your Soul
Matthew 11:20-30

As we've said before, as you read the gospels you discover that Jesus is this deeply compelling and attractive figure. And yet, the truth is that at times he also says things that throw you back. He says things that to our modern ears are disturbing, if not totally unacceptable. And we like the compelling Jesus, but we recoil from the controversial Jesus. And in this passage we see both those Jesus' – the Jesus who defies characterisation. You see, here is the Jesus who promises us rest. But he's also the Jesus who calls down judgement. Here's the Jesus who calls the weary to come to him, but he's also the Jesus who sends the proud away empty – and who makes claims about himself that if you or I made them, wouldn't just be proud, they'd have us locked up.

So, how can you reconcile these seemingly different faces of Jesus? Well, we're going to look at Jesus the Judge, Jesus the Revealer and Jesus the Rest-giver.

Jesus the Judge
Now, if you remember from last week Jesus has taken the people of Israel in general to task for refusing to accept him or John the Baptist. They said John had a demon because he wouldn't party, and Jesus was a glutton because he would. But now, Jesus turns on certain Galilean towns where he's been ministering, v20, 'Then he began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done.' And did you notice what he denounces them for? Because it wasn't because they hadn't rewarded him, the great miracle worker, with fame, or fortune, was it? It wasn't because they had viciously opposed him, and run inflammatory Fake News stories about him. Instead, v20, it was 'Because they did not repent.'

Now, to repent is to recognise that you're wrong, and that the direction that your life is going in is wrong, and you need to turn around. It's to recognise that the authority you thought you had over your life, to decide for yourself what's right and wrong, is wrong, and instead God has that authority, and that what he says trumps what you say, or what you feel. And rather than God needing to get in line with you, repentance is about realising that you need to move your life into line with him and to turn away from what he says is sin – no matter how much you like it. And Jesus is saying that his presence in these towns, and his miracles, should have brought these people to repentance. But they hadn't.

And as a result Jesus calls out woes upon them: Verse 21, 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!' And in v23, he threatens Capernaum, the leading, propserous city of the area, with hell: 'And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades.' Down to the place of the dead.

So these towns are in trouble – and it's not because Jesus hasn't been there, but because he had. It's not because they didn't know the truth, or had never heard, but because they had.

Now, what do you think of that? You see to call out 'woe' on someone is like calling out a curse, isn't it? 'You cities have refused to repent, and as a result it is going to go very badly for you.' And yet, it's more than just that. Jesus compares them *un*favourably with three of the most notorious cities in the Bible. Tyre and Sidon were pagan cities repeatedly criticised by Old Testament prophets for their arrogance, self-indulgence, luxurious living and godlessness. They were the prime examples of their day of all that is wrong with a world alienated from God. And to a Jewish person, Sodom was the epitome of evil. So if you were a first century Jew and you heard Jesus saying that things were going to go better for Sodom, and Tyre, and Sidon than for you on judgment day, you'd think, that is outrageous! You can't judge me like that!

But do we like it anymore than them? You see, if any part of the historic Christian faith is unpalatable to modern ears, even downright offensive, it's the idea that God can judge us, that there is some authority over my life higher than what I want or feel. Our modern mantra is, 'be true to yourself, and don't let anyone judge you, and you're to judge no one else.' And if you're swimming in that kind of world, to hear the message that if I don't repent, if I don't turn around and change the direction of travel of my life, if I don't submit myself to the way God sees things, I will face judgement on the last day, is deeply offensive, or at least unacceptable. And so many people are repelled by the idea of a God who judges.

But are we, really? I mean, on the surface, sure we want a message that says that in the end everything will be ok for everyone, and no one can judge you but yourself, but in reality, do we really think that's true?

You see, imagine what happens if you, or society, abandons the idea of God as judge. Imagine the consequences if there was no higher judge than your own heart, no external authority to what you felt or thought was right or wrong, and only you could decide what was right and wrong for you. You don't look at the barbarism of ISIS, or the holocaust, and think that, do you? You know that there are somethings that are intrinsically wrong, whoever does them, whenever they do them, no matter what the person thinks or feels, regardless of what the majority, or society, says, don't you. You know that the call to speak the truth is higher than your desire at times to lie. You know that the call to protect and care for the vulnerable is higher than the desire to take advantage of them. And you simply cannot fall back on, 'well, it's ok provided no one else gets harmed'. Because who decides what harm is? Is it you? Or Me? Is it the majority against the minority? Or the minority against the majority?

In reality, we all want there to be some kind of accounting, some kind of judgement – the problem is we can't agree on what, or who, should be judged. I mean, take Sodom, the city Jesus uses as an example here. What was she judged for? If you read the account in Genesis 18-19, she's judged for her sexual immorality. And maybe you read that and think, 'absolutely, she deserved to be

judged, and sexually immoral people today deserve to be judged.' Or you might think, 'that's terrible – to judge people for their sexual practices is the height of intolerance.' But then you read in Ezekiel 16 that Sodom's sin wasn't just sexual immorality, it was pride and greed and failing to help the poor and the needy. And now, those who don't think she should be judged for her sexual immorality think she should absolutely be judged for not caring for the poor, or vulnerable, for the minorities, - greedy wall-street bankers the lot of them! But those who think she should be judged for her sexual sin hear that and think, 'hang on, that's not greed, that's market forces, you can't judge people for that!' And yet God judged Sodom for both.

You see, we want there to be an accounting, we want sins to be paid for, and the wicked brought to justice. It's just we don't want it to happen to us, or to those we approve of. We want it to happen to those others we think should be judged. In fact, we want to be the judge. But what if you were? What if you were judged according to the standards by which you judge others? I think it was Francis Schaeffer, the Christian thinker and writer, who said, imagine if everyone of us had a tape-recorder hung around our necks at birth, and every time we criticised someone else for something it was recorded. All the times we say this person failed at this, or they should have done that, or this or that they did was wrong, and they shouldn't have been so proud, or so greedy, or so untruthful, or so selfish, or so intolerant. And at judgment day that tape was played back and our own standards were used to judge us – none of us could stand. So our own consciences, our own hearts, what we approve and disapprove of, condemn us.

But Jesus says, there's a standard even greater than your heart, and it's me. And it's how you respond to me that will either condemn you or save you.

Jesus the Revealer

Now, if Jesus the Judge is controversial, what about Jesus the exclusivist? What about the Jesus who says, no one can come to the Father except through me? That's hardly the stuff of our modern, 'I get to choose my path to God', is it? And yet look what Jesus prays here, v25, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will."

So Jesus is saying, it's not just heaven and earth that God is sovereign and Lord over, but salvation. That God reveals and hides according to his good pleasure. And look who Jesus says he hides the way of salvation from: the wise and the understanding. Now, that's not some kind of anti-intellectual bias. Jesus is talking about those who refuse to listen, who refuse to learn, who already think they know the truth, who don't think Jesus can teach them anything. To people who are self-sufficient, and closed, and think they have no need of him, God hides salvation. But to little children, he reveals the way!

Which begs the question, doesn't it - who are the little children? Well in Matthew's gospel, that's a description Jesus uses repeatedly for his followers. And in that culture children were at the bottom of the food chain. They were the socially unimportant, they were the opposite of the wise and understanding. So why does Jesus call those who follow him children? And why would God reveal the truth of salvation to people he describes as children, and not to others?

Because a child is eager to learn, isn't he? A child knows she's dependent on mum and dad. Dad, I can't tie my shoes! Dad, I can't carry this, it's too heavy! Dad, I can't get my arm through this sleeve! Dad, help! So, a child is always looking up. And when they have a dad who loves them, they receive. And a child likes nothing more than to receive free gifts, do they! In fact they get excited and count down the days to the next birthday, or Christmas, months before – because it's gift day!

And Jesus says, that's the kind of person God reveals himself to. To those who humble themselves and look up to their heavenly Father knowing that salvation is a gift from him. To those who know that they don't have the wisdom, or the understanding they need to do life; who know their hearts, or their feelings, aren't a good enough judge.

And so the Father reveals and chooses and draws those who come to him like a child comes to his Father. It's the same argument the apostle Paul uses in 1 Corinthians 1: It's not because you're wise, or powerful, or influential, or from the right background that you get chosen, but because you're weak, and you know you don't know everything, and you know your social capital ultimately counts for nothing – that's who God calls.

But then Jesus goes even further, and he says it's not just that you can't know God on your own and you need him to reveal himself to you. It's that you cannot know him except through Jesus. Verse 27, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him."

Now if I were to ask you, 'do you know Andy, or Linley, or John?' You'd say, 'sure, I know them'. But what you'd mean is, I sort of know them, I can tell you who they are, or you might even mean 'I've even chatted to them', or had them over, or even 'they're a really great friend'. But when Jesus says that he knows the Father and the Father knows him, he's drawing on how the Bible uses that word to know – and it means to know and enjoy someone in intimate relationship. And Jesus is saying that he and God the Father enjoy a unique, mutual relationship that no one else can come close to. And that is an extraordinary, astonishing claim for a man to make.

Apparently, Mahatma Gandhi was asked on his deathbed, 'Have you found God?' What was his response? I mean Gandhi was, even still is, revered, as a sage, as a man of superlative wisdom and insight. And his response to that question, have you found God, was, 'No, I'm still looking.' It was a very honest answer. But that's not the answer Jesus would give. Jesus doesn't say he's still looking; he doesn't even claim to have looked and found, he claims to know God and be known by him in a totally unique way – a way that no other religious leader who anyone takes seriously has ever claimed. And then he says, and only I can reveal God to you. You have to forsake every other path. If you want to find God, you have to come to me, Jesus says.

And that's why Christianity is so attractive, and yet so hated, isn't it? It's why Jesus is so compelling and so off-putting – it's the exclusivity of the man Jesus of Nazareth – a man who says the most extraordinary thing, and yet a man you cannot dismiss. And he says, you can know God beyond a shadow of doubt, you can be saved from the judgement to come, but first and finally, you have to come to me.

Why? Because he's the only one who can give your soul rest.

Jesus the Rest-giver

Verse 28, "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." So Jesus invites all who want to, to come to him. But he qualifies the 'all', doesn't he? It's not the wise and understanding who are invited, but the weary and the burdened. Which group would you put yourself in?

Well, to answer that, ask yourself, weary and burdened from what? Come to me and find rest – from what? What is it that condemns you to hard labour? Well, I would say three things. And the first is legalistic religion. You see, for these first century Jews, a yoke, the wooden beam that joined two oxen together, was a metaphor for the Jewish law. Rabbis spoke of 'the yoke of the law'. And if you think you need to do enough and prove yourself good enough and moral enough in the eyes of God to save yourself, and escape the judgement to come, you'll never find rest, will you? Because there will always be more to do, you'll never be sure you've done enough, or prayed enough, or given enough, to win God's favour. And your soul grows weary in trying.

But not just legalistic religion. Irreligious secularism can do it too, can't it? The need to prove yourself to others, or to yourself; the need to be beautiful enough, or fit enough, or successful enough. The need to own and possess that drives your consumption and maxes out your spending. And the gods of power or wealth or image or success, can never have enough, never have enough of you. And you're always restless, always trying to keep up.

Or there are the anxieties and the weariness of everyday life. You fear for the future, for your relationships, for those you love, because you're not really sure deep down that God is looking out for you, you feel adrift and fearful in the world. And there's no deep rest in your heart.

And Jesus stands in front of you and says, come to me, and I will give you rest. Verse 29, "take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."

But how can learning from Jesus possibly give you rest? ISn't that the problem with religious teachers? Here's a list of things you must do, learn and practice my list and you can save yourself? And isn't the problem with Jesus, that he presents this compelling image but you know you can't possibly attain it – that if you lived a thousand lives, you could never be as good as him? So, if he's the standard against which you're going to be judged, it's not rest he can give but work, work, work!

But listen to what he says, I am gentle and lowly, learn that from me – be like that child, be humble in heart, learn to receive from me all that I have done for you.

You see, he can give you rest from legalistic religion and trying to do enough to escape judgement, because at the cross he was judged for you. Jesus the Judge was himself judged, not just by man, but by God, as he bore your sins on the cross. And Jesus who calls down curses on these unrepentant cities himself became a curse for you. And the one who warns a city that she will be brought down to the dead, is himself laid in the dust of death, to save us from death. And he lived the life you and I continually fail to live, and he died the death we all deserve to die, as the one who knew the deepest relationship with God was alienated from God, so that you and I might find rest from all our trying to save ourselves. And it's there, at the cross, that the judgement, and the love of God meet; where God is both judge and rest-giver.

But Jesus also offers you rest from the pursuit of the idols of irreligious secularism. Because when you come to him in repentance, you know your worth is not dependent on what you do or what you own, or who you know. It's not dependent on your success or your resumé or your possessions. It's dependent on him. And it's his yoke you take up. And now it's him and not the world who's going to walk along side you, and train you.

But he also gives you rest from the anxieties of daily life that can be so sapping. You see, you can know that Jesus loves you because he died for you. But that doesn't mean he has the power or sovereign control over your life, does it? But Jesus didn't just die for you. He rose again. Death could not hold him, and he ascended and reigns in heaven. And if this God who offers you rest, loves you so much that he would die for you, and rose again proving he has the power over

death, don't you think he also has power over the circumstances of your life? That he will not let anything happen to you without a loving, fatherly purpose. So let his love for you, and his resurrection power over every circumstance of life sink in, and a deep inner rest from worry will flood your soul.

But of course, being yoked to Jesus isn't the spiritual equivalent of lounging on the sofa with a bag of chips, a beer and the TV remote, is it? And it's not a rest, a freedom, from zero constraints. And it's not a rest that spares you from difficulty or hardship. It's a rest that means that now, you can do the good works he's prepared for you to do, and you can go out and tell others about him, not in the hope of earning his favour, or finding rest, but because you already know his favour and have received his rest. Because his yoke is easy and his burden is light.