

There are a number of truisms about preaching. One of the ones that I have found to be most true over the almost twenty years I have been doing this is that the preacher often preaches what they themselves most need to hear.

There is also a huge amount of good advice for those who attempt to preach. One maxim is that the preacher should preach from their scars and not their wounds. This means that while it is good to use the challenges and pain we ourselves have experienced to inform the Gospel we proclaim, it is more prudent, perhaps more helpful to preach after we have had sufficient time to heal a little and reflect. It can be too uncomfortable for ourselves – and for our listeners – to experience the rawness of our wounds. Far better and easier to share our experience when our scars may still mark us but prove too that survival is possible.

Like all good advice, it has its exceptions. And if we as preachers, if we as Christians, only talk from past experience; if we never give voice to real and present pain, then how can we speak to those bearing wounds that they are not sure they will survive long enough to develop scars? And so, this sermon begins not with a cheery illustration but with an apologia for what I am about to do. Because today I am going to preach from my own wounds, trusting that I am not alone. Trusting that others here are feeling like this too.

Because this week, I am feeling a bit broken. I am feeling a bit broken physically after a nasty bout of flu. Don't worry about me – I'll be fine, but I'm not on top from. I am feeling a bit broken personally as numerous people I love are wrestling with health problems or family challenges, and there is nothing I can do but be there and love them and pray for them and sit with them in their pain. I feel broken looking at the communities I live in, love and serve being pulled apart by fear and misinformation. I feel broken as I think about the war and climate change causing such suffering around our world. And I feel most broken when I see the Church, which is called to be the antidote to all this, giving way at times to fear and anxiety and seeking its security in money and power, thus denying her call to be with those on the margins, in those places where God is to be found.

And maybe it is just me, but when I feel surrounded by all this brokenness, I can find myself wondering if I have got it all wrong. Maybe I am mistaken to

believe in love and justice and kindness and truth. Maybe I am naïve to hope. Perhaps this Jesus I follow and this Kingdom I long to inhabit fully is a pipe dream, and I am a fool...

When I feel like this, I imagine I might be feeling something like John the Baptist in today's Gospel. Here is someone who has lived a life fuelled by the fire of God's Spirit since before he was born. Here is someone who can see clearly what true goodness is. Here is someone who made sacrifices and counted them as naught as he preached the Kingdom and turned people back to God. Here is someone who was sure and courageous and passionate. And now he is in a prison cell, a broken man sending a message to Jesus, basically saying "was I wrong?"

Jesus' response was tenderness itself: tell him what you see. Tell him. Tell him that the age-old prophecies are coming true. It has not been for nothing. He wasn't wrong. Yes he is suffering. Yes the world is not yet as it should be. But he has placed his hope in the right place...

Then Jesus goes on to say a very interesting thing. Blessed is anyone who does not take offence at me. Well, that's peculiar isn't it? Why on earth should anyone take offence at people being healed, restored and freed? But let's think back to last week's gospel. How did John describe Jesus' ministry then?

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

OOF! He doesn't mess about does he. John's message is one of judgement, isn't it? Urgent and a tiny bit scary. Well, maybe a big bit scary. And you can understand why John might be confused if he was expecting an apocalyptic winnowing of humankind and instead sees the slow and gentle work of Jesus. We find ourselves asking John's own question: was John wrong?

The temptation is sometimes to put John and Jesus' ministries in opposition with one another, but I see them as two sides of the same coin. You cannot have justice without judgement, and in societies where a judge would only visit intermittently, the coming of a judge who could grant justice for the poor and weak and marginalised against the powerful who oppressed them was very

very good news indeed. In that context, judgement looks less like vengeance or punishment and more like restoration, like freedom, like peace. In Jesus, the righteous judge who brings justice and hope to those who long for it – well the judge John prophesied - has arrived. He just looks a little different to how John expected. And so Jesus points him back to the ancient prophecies both he and John would know and love, like the portion of Isaiah we have heard read today. Because in that reading, the justice and judgement of God looks like mercy, like hope and like joy for those who need it most. I am sure John will have understood the message.

But Jesus is not speaking only to John. He is speaking in public and for posterity. Because Jesus knows that some will be offended by him. His own friend and disciple Judas would betray Jesus because he was so offended by Jesus' radical grace, welcome and love. This wasn't the sort of Messiah he wanted or needed. And that strand of offence has continued down through the ages as people have tried to distort the Gospel into something more palatable: something more certain and less challenging. It continues today. Russell Moore, a US Baptist said in a recent interview that multiple colleagues had told him a very similar story. They would quote the Sermon on the Mount in their service and congregation members would challenge them for introducing liberal talking points into their preaching. When the pastor explained that they were literally the words of Jesus Christ, their congregation members told them: "that doesn't work anymore – that's weak". Weakness is an offence. And while it is less blatant, we see similar issues emerging in our own country. Love your neighbour – well only if they look like me, only if they have had a life like mine. Radical love and mercy for some is an offence.

Some people don't want a humble Christ, a gentle Christ, a Christ who will challenge the world's systems of domination and exploitation by simply refusing to be part of them, a Christ who challenges us to do likewise. They want a Christ who is strong FOR them, who defends their culture, their values, their cause. A Christ who winnows the good folks from the bad (so long as we are on the good side).

The reality is that Jesus came not to winnow people one from another, but to winnow our hearts with judgement and mercy. Less black and white, less us and them, more challenging, more painful, but ultimately more filled with

grace. And blessed are those who do not take offence at this. Blessed are those who offer their hearts to Jesus this Advent to be winnowed, knowing that in the gracious love of Christ this judgement will be gentle and the fruit will be mercy.

So if you are feeling a little broken this Advent, despairing at the state of the world, the state of the church, at the state of our communities and maybe even a bit broken at the state of our own lives as we try and too often fail to live the love of Jesus. Take heart. You haven't got it all wrong. You aren't mistaken to believe in love and justice and kindness and truth. You aren't naïve to hope. This Jesus you follow and this Kingdom you long to inhabit fully is a dream, but advent reminds us that dawn is coming and when it does, we will awake to the fullness of life in God. To have a heart that longs for such goodness is to be blessed indeed.

And so I am going to finish this with some other words of blessing which Jesus said:

³ 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

⁵ 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

⁶ 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

⁷ 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

⁸ 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

⁹ 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

¹⁰ 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Amen