

Understanding the Bible #9 – Messiah 2

Based on *The Bible: A Story That Makes Sense of Life* by Andrew Ollerton

Bible Reading

Who has believed our message

and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

He grew up before him like a tender shoot,

and like a root out of dry ground.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,

nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by mankind,

a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.

Like one from whom people hide their faces

he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain

and bore our suffering,

yet we considered him punished by God,

stricken by him, and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,

he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was on him,

and by his wounds we are healed.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray,

each of us has turned to our own way;

and the Lord has laid on him

the iniquity of us all.

Isaiah 53:1-6

Recap

In the last session we looked at what the concept of ‘Messiah’ came to mean to the Jewish nation, someone who would deliver them from

their pagan overlords, much as Mattathias Maccabeus had in the second century BC.

We then began to look at how Jesus transformed these expectations, showing us that the Messiah the Old Testament prophets had predicted is more than just a powerful military leader, that he is someone who brings God's kingdom into this world, defeating our most dangerous enemies, sin and death.

Jesus' arrival in this world is nothing less than the return of this world's rightful king. Think of the Lion King on a much bigger scale, Simba is exiled from his homeland by Scar, the fertile land becomes barren and the inhabitants begin to starve. The true king then returns and defeats Scar and his cronies.

Simba is made king, and the land flourishes again. Hurrah!

Jesus is the world's true king, the promised Messiah, which literally translated means 'anointed one', a person specially chosen for a task.

Jesus' message is filled with talk about 'the kingdom of God', a place of flourishing, a place where God's love reigns.

Jesus was not merely a good man who preached a life of brotherly (and sisterly) love, Jesus came into this world to do battle with the powers of darkness and evil, as we saw at the close of the last talk, where at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus wins his first big fight with Satan, the spiritual ruler of this world.

And so, as Mark's gospel records after his wilderness testing...

After John [the Baptist] was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

Mark 1:14-15

Notice how Jesus makes this powerful declaration right after John the Baptist, a righteous man, and a close relative of Jesus, has been imprisoned (and who will subsequently be killed) for proclaiming the news of the coming Messiah. The kingdom of God can exist even in the darkest of situations.

Although the kingdom of God is not a country with physical boundaries like France or Germany, it is more than just wherever God's *shalom* is being encouraged and experienced.

God rules the entire universe, if he doesn't, he's not God. But we know that we live in a world where *shalom* is not experienced everywhere.

As Jesus taught his disciples to pray, 'Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'. Jesus is in the business of destroying evil, and restoring and transforming this world into a place that conforms with God's perfect beauty and love.

So, how does this look in practice?

One Sabbath, Jesus visited his local synagogue. He asks for the scroll of Isaiah, one of the prophets who talks the most about God's promises to restore his rule over the world.

He reads from Isaiah 61...

*"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."*

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Luke 4:18-21

Wow! Jesus chooses a passage of scripture that talks about a promised Spirit empowered saviour of Israel, someone who would bring about a new era of freedom for the people of Israel.

And here, in a synagogue in an unimportant Israelite town, Jesus announces that he, a local handyman, was the fulfilment of this hope.

And this is what Jesus did. During his three year ministry, he touched and healed lepers, made the lame walk and even raised the dead, challenging and conquering sickness, evil and death. Where Jesus was, so was God's kingdom.

And he taught about what this kingdom looks like. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is an example of this, and it is a radical statement of intent. When he had finished delivering it, Matthew's gospel says that his hearers were amazed.

Our familiarity with it can blunt just how stunning the message is, maybe even more so 2000 years later...

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you."

Matthew 5:3-4 (The Message)

This is upside-down teaching. It is counter-intuitive to most humans. This is where Jesus begins to contradict what most Jews were expecting, the warrior king who would defeat their Roman rulers. The Jews wanted to be in control. To be important, successful, self-sufficient. This is not Jesus's mission.

That's why one of Jesus' most used words was 'repent'.

The word 'repent' tends to bring to mind old black and white photos of people toting sandwich boards with 'the end of the world is nigh' on them... but it is an important word, meaning 'change your mind' or

even ‘change your allegiance’. Jesus was challenging the crowd (and us) to rethink the way we do life, and make a U-turn. To experience God’s blessing (happiness) is to do things his way, and that is not the way most humans live.

The Gospels record many instances of this happening – people encountering Jesus and discovering the power of God breaking into their lives. Zacchaeus the tax collector, rich but hated by his own people, gets picked out from the crowd by Jesus, who invites himself to Zac’s place for a meal. The curious crowd see this social outcast publicly declare that he will give half his possessions to the poor, and compensate anyone he has cheated four times what he owes them.

This is the evidence of true repentance.

Jesus chooses a team

As we’ve seen in earlier sessions, the nation of Israel was chosen by God to be his representative, to be an example of his saving mission to the world.

Sadly, they failed miserably. The Old Testament, with a few brief exceptions, is a record of Israel not fulfilling their mission to be God’s light to the surrounding nations.

A major part of Jesus’ work was to inspire a group of people with God’s message of love and hope, and for them to spread this message throughout the world.

And so Jesus assembles a team of 12, including fishermen, a tax collector and political extremists. The number 12 is significant, representing the 12 tribes that formed the nation of Israel. The disciples were representing a restored Israel who would take God’s truth to all nations.

One of the words used for Jesus in the New Testament is ‘Rabbi’. A Rabbi was someone with a deep commitment to God and the teachings of the Old Testament. Rabbis would have followers who

often lived with them, learning from them, by word and example, how to live the way God wanted them to, a bit like apprenticeships work today. The word used in the Bible is 'disciple', and one of the Greek words used for it is '*mimētes*' which means 'imitation'.

Jesus's disciples didn't just memorise what Jesus said, they learned a whole new way to think and live. The goal of a true disciple is a whole-life thing. It means becoming like the Rabbi, learning to live and think the way the Rabbi does.

And that is what Jesus's disciples tried, and often failed, to do. And when they failed, Jesus pointed out why they failed, and encouraged them to try again. Just as he does with you and me, minute by minute, day by day. He will never give up on you.

Matthew chapter 16 records a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples. They have seen Jesus heal the daughter of a Canaanite woman, miraculously feed large crowds of people and rebuke Jewish religious leaders.

The disciples must have had so many questions, Jesus is obviously not a normal Rabbi. But what/who is he?

In Matthew 16, Jesus asks the disciples who people think he is, the disciples reply...

"Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

Matthew 16:14

Jesus then asks...

"But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Matthew 16:15

And Simon Peter, always one to speak first and think later says...

"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."

Matthew 16:16

And, astonishingly, Jesus accepts the title, replying...

“Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.”

Matthew 16:17

Some people claim that Jesus was just a great moral teacher. The scriptures make it clear, on this and many other occasions, that this is not the case.

And, having made clear who he is, Jesus then explains to the disciples his messianic plan...

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

Matthew 16:21

This was not the inspirational speech that the disciples were expecting. They were sure that the promised Messiah was going to overthrow their Roman oppressors, not be killed by their religious leaders! (They were probably so shocked by this that they didn't even catch the 'raised to life' bit).

Peter, probably thinking that his teacher is having a funny turn, takes Jesus to one side and assures him that he's 'got his back', that Peter will make sure nothing bad ever happens to his master.

Jesus' response is emphatic...

“Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Matthew 16:23

The force of Jesus' reply is significant. He realises that, once again, Satan is tempting him away from his mission to save humanity.

Peter's intentions were good, but he has to learn from Jesus, not the other way around.

Jesus then reminds his disciples that imitating him means being willing to lose their lives for him, which after Jesus's death, resurrection and ascension many of them did.

Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done."

Matthew 16:24-27

These verses are important ones for 21st century western Christians to take to heart. For many people in the affluent west, Christianity has become little more than self-improvement therapy, a way to feel better about ourselves, and in some churches to be guaranteed health and wealth.

I doubt that many of us fit in this category, but I know that I easily slip into letting myself believe that if I do things God's way, he will reward me accordingly by answering my prayers for healing and provision. And, of course, he often does. But it is not guaranteed, at least, not before we die, or when Jesus returns.

God is just, he will reward us for what we have done. But we need to set our sights a little farther than tomorrow morning. There is work to be done in this world, and it won't always mean we get richer or even happier in the way most people think of what 'happier' means.

Six days later, Jesus takes Peter, James and John for a walk up a high mountain.

There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, “Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters – one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.”

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud covered them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him.”

Matthew 17:2-5

I spoke on this passage back in March of this year. It is a strange and magnificent event where Jesus changes in appearance, and is joined by Moses and Elijah.

Here we have two people representing Israel’s history. The Old Testament is often referred to as the Law and the Prophets, and here we have Moses, the bringer of the Old Testament Law, and Elijah, one of the greatest Old Testament prophets, talking with Jesus.

Luke’s gospel says they spoke about his departure, literally his exodus, which he was about to fulfil in Jerusalem. This exodus was going to fulfil the Law and the Prophets with Jesus becoming the ultimate Passover lamb.

Jesus’ transfiguration is clarifying his mission on earth. The voice from the cloud repeats what the voice from heaven said at Jesus’ baptism, adding three telling words... ‘Listen to him’.

And so we move toward the most devastating part of Jesus’ ministry, his crucifixion.

In the words of Luke’s gospel...

As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.

Luke 9:51

All the main world religions have symbols.

Hinduism has the 'Om' symbol, representing the truth of ultimate reality, as well as a oneness and connection with the whole world.

Buddhism has the Dharma, which stands for the nature of reality regarded as a universal truth taught by the Buddha.

Islam has the Star & Crescent, which started as the symbol of the Ottoman empire, but has now become associated with the Muslim world.

Judaism avoided a symbol for most of its existence, because of the Biblical ban on using images that can become idols, but following the Second World War the Star of David was adopted, partly as a protest against the stars that Jews were forced to wear by the Nazis.

Christianity has... a cross. A symbol of one of the most brutal and humiliating execution methods ever invented. The Romans used it as a punishment, and as a deterrent. To die on a cross was the most painful and shameful way to die.

And yet the gospel writers all make the crucifixion of Christ their focus. John spends nearly half of his gospel writing about Jesus's final week. And this is because Christ's followers quickly came to realise that the cross was not a horrible mistake, but the climax of the Messiah's mission.

Let's take a look at how this plays out.

It's April, c. AD 30. Jerusalem is packed full of pilgrims who have travelled there to celebrate the Passover festival. Remember, Passover is the celebration of the Exodus from Egypt, but it had also come to symbolise the long hoped for deliverance of Israel from foreign oppression.

Jesus had become a well know, if controversial, Rabbi. And there were those who were wondering if he was the promised Messiah.

So, when Jesus rides down the Mount of Olives on a donkey, word would have spread that he was fulfilling one of the the prophet Zechariah's great Messianic prophecies.

*But I will encamp at my temple
to guard it against marauding forces.
Never again will an oppressor overrun my people,
for now I am keeping watch.
Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
His rule will extend from sea to sea
and from the Euphrates to the ends of the earth.*

Zechariah 9:8-10

Soon a large crowd has gathered around Jesus, waving palm fronds and shouting 'Hosanna!', which means 'Rescue us!'. Hope was beginning to grow that they were going to see the political liberation of Israel in their lifetime.

However, their hope soon turns to disappointment. Jesus does not launch supernatural death rays on the local Roman barracks, instead he visits the Jerusalem Temple and lectures the Jewish religious leaders on their greed and hypocrisy. For Jesus, as with his father, judgment always starts at home.

Jesus was moving towards defeating an enemy much bigger, and more evil, than the Roman Empire.

Thursday was the day when Passover was celebrated with a symbolic meal. Jesus books a room where he and his disciples shared what has become known as the Last Supper.

When you hear the phrase ‘Last Supper’, most of us think of Leonardo Da Vinci’s great fresco, with Jesus in the centre, and the disciples gathered around him, sat at a large table.

However, the actual Last Supper would have looked a lot different. The disciples would have been lying on the floor around a low table (the way people ate formal meals at this time), with Jesus at the head of it.

During the meal, Jesus took the matzo bread (an unleavened flatbread) in his hands. It represented the rushed meal that the Israelites had before their departure from Egypt, baking bread that had not had time for the dough to rise.

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.”

Matthew 26:26

And as he says this, he transforms the meaning of the meal and makes it about himself! Jesus was about to create a new Exodus, enabled by his broken body. Not for the first or last time, the disciples must have been wondering what was going on.

After the meal, Jesus once again rewrites the Passover script.

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Matthew 26:27-28

At the point, the disciples' confusion would have turned to shock and outrage. The idea of drinking blood is horrible, but to a Jew it was forbidden by the Law of Moses.

Jesus is here alluding to the Passover lamb, whose blood was smeared on Israel's doorposts to guarantee the safety of their firstborn in the final Egyptian plague. Jesus was about to become the human race's Passover lamb, paying the price for our sins with his blood, providing humans with a new way to experience his forgiveness, love and blessing.

I don't think the disciples would have understood this immediately, it was just too much to take in. But after Jesus's resurrection and ascension, they came to see that this was what Jesus was getting at... and that is one of the reasons why communion became the centrepiece of Christian worship.

Jesus then leads his disciples to a grove of olive trees known as the Garden of Gethsemane.

Here Jesus begins to experience emotionally what he has understood rationally for a long time. Jesus had diligently studied the Hebrew scriptures since he was a child, and in those stories, God's judgment was often pictured as a cup of wine that the unfaithful Israelite nation will be forced to drink, e.g.

*In the hand of the Lord is a cup
full of foaming wine mixed with spices;
he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth
drink it down to its very dregs.*

Psalm 75:8

Jesus has just offered his disciples a cup of forgiveness, a new agreement between God and humans. But to enable this to happen, Jesus must drink their cup of judgment. *Our* cup of judgment.

Jesus walks a small distance away from the disciples, falls to his knees and prays...

“Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done.”

Luke 22:42

Jesus knows what he has to do. But he *really* doesn't want to do it. There will be times in our lives when we know there are things we have to do, even though we know we don't want to do them. Jesus fully understands this, he has been through it.

And so Jesus moves forward, apprehensive but determined, to his death on a cross. As they leave the garden, Judas, a disciple who Jesus has only hours ago washed the feet of, arrives with a lynch mob.

His arrest is followed by a series of fake trials. Both Jewish and Roman authorities could tell that Jesus was an innocent man, but the crowds of people who just a few days ago were cheering on their new Messiah, were now crying for his blood.

Pilate eventually gives in to the mob's demands and hands him over to be flogged and crucified. And so, the creator of the universe submits to being stripped naked and nailed to a cross, probably at about 9am in the morning.

But the agonising pain of crucifixion, gradually bleeding and suffocating to death, was not the worst of his suffering. From midday the sky was unnaturally darkened as Jesus fought the toughest battle of his life.

About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Matthew 27:46

This was the moment Jesus had most dreaded. The moment that he had wrestled with in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, hanging from a

cross, jeered at by the crowds, denied by one of his closest friends and deserted by most of his followers, Jesus, fully God and fully man, drinks the cup of divine judgement, accepting all of humanity's guilt as he fulfilled Isaiah's 700 year-old-prophecy.

*But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.*

Isaiah 53:5

Jesus had prepared for this all through his human life, and here, on a rocky hill near Jerusalem, he accepted the entire weight of all of the world's rebellion against God, past, present and future. With his last breath he cried 'It is finished'. Love won over hate. Justice over injustice. Truth over lies. Hallelujah!

But to the people watching, this victory was not so obvious. All they could see was a dead body being removed from the cross. So much for their hoped-for Messiah. There didn't seem to be anything very good about this particular Friday. Jesus' followers slink away, disappointed, disheartened and scared. Their beloved Jesus was dead. It seemed as if once again the Romans had won. All hope was lost.

But on Sunday the whole world changed. Jesus, having broken the curse of death by his physical death, became more alive than he had ever been.

Jesus' resurrection body is similar in many ways to his earthly body, but so much more than his earthly body. He is not a ghost, he can eat and drink, and he still has the scars from his crucifixion. But he seems to be able to walk through walls, and move from one place to another incredibly quickly. In the words of C.S. Lewis, he is 'more real' than this world.

And so Jesus goes around encouraging his followers, satisfying Thomas's doubts, forgiving Peter and telling him that his Church leadership post had not been revoked.

The truth of the resurrection was one of the keystones of the early Church's faith. Death has been defeated. And the one who defeated it has promised us that where he has gone, his followers will one day join him. Now that really is something to look forward to!

Hallelujah!