

Matthew 17:14-27

Christians: Nothing is impossible for them Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Every so often the newspapers report a headline along the lines of “69% of teenage girls want to be glamour models.” Of course once you look beyond the hype that’s often not really what the results of the survey actually said, but there are definitely some striking statistics out there. For example Leona Lewis, Coleen Rooney, Katie Price and Victoria Beckham regularly emerge as four of the women considered by teenage girls to be role models. And, of course, being the nice, respectable kind of people that we are, we all shake our heads and tut and say how sad it is that these girls don’t want to be doctors or lawyers or nurses or engineers.

But let’s not be too hard on the young teens. After all I’m sure that there are quite a lot of men sitting here this morning for whom the only reason that you’re not a Premiership Footballer isn’t because you decided to do something more noble – it’s that you weren’t good enough! When Abi Titmuss can earn the same as 35 nurses and doesn’t have to tell relatives their loved one is about to die, take anybody to the toilet, administer highly complex drugs or deal with NHS managers who is really surprised that modelling looks more impressive than nursing?

Let me put it another way. Whose job would you rather have – Gordon Brown’s or Jonathan Ross’s? Would you rather wake up to “today I have to deal with overpaid bankers, councils running out of salt, global terrorism, interest rates and university cutbacks.” Or “today I have to interview Denzel Washington about his latest post-apocalyptic thriller”

The idea that I can have fame or influence or wealth or, ideally, all of the above, without actually having lots of responsibility is really attractive isn’t it? So adults can’t really criticise teens for aspiring to exactly the same things most of us would aspire to. The only difference is that most of us have come to a stage where we recognise that ambitions to rock stardom, international sports icon or WAG are just not realistic! We are almost all seduced by the thought of power without responsibility.

Which is why being a Christian can seem like it’s not that great much of the time. We read a verse like v21 in our passage “nothing will be impossible for you” and think “great!” But then the preacher explains that it doesn’t actually mean that nothing is impossible – but merely

that nothing God wants commissions and empowers us to do is impossible and we feel, well frankly, we feel a bit cheated don’t we?

So what is the right relationship between power and responsibility? Between freedom and obligation? How can you and I live in a way, in God’s world, that gives us true freedom – not the freedom to be who I want to be but **true** freedom – the freedom to be the person God has made me to be?

Well in this passage in Matthew’s gospel we’re going to see that both the power of a Christian and the responsibility of a Christian are absolutely and fundamentally tied to who Jesus is. We cannot rightly understand our power and our responsibility without rightly understanding who Jesus is.

And, even if you already feel like you understand who Jesus is, the more you remind yourself of that and come to see it more and more clearly the better equipped we will be to live as his followers in his world.

Matthew is going to show us, in this section, three things that we will do if we follow the real Jesus...

1 You will trust... and move mountains (v14-21)

Peter, James and John, the inner circle of disciples of Jesus, have just had an amazing experience. Jesus led them up a high mountain, probably Mt. Hermon, a huge 9,500ft peak. But what they experienced there wasn’t just an impressive view of the ground. Instead they got a much more impressive view of Jesus as he appeared to them in great light and glory, flanked by two of the great heroes of the Jewish faith, Moses and Elijah, and as the very voice of God thundered that they should listen to Jesus.

The four men descended from this mountain-top experience back to a very ordinary and depressing scene. They find a father, obviously in distress, who has come to Jesus’ disciples to find healing for his son who is afflicted by a terrible illness. The son is epileptic. But this is no ordinary disease. The particular form of his sickness means he is frequently thrown into fire or water; the demon that Jesus identifies as lying behind this particular case of epilepsy is actively trying to kill the boy.

Imagine the man’s joy when, after months of years or enduring constant worry for his child, hears that Jesus’ disciples have been empowered

by their remarkable rabbi to perform wonderful healings.

And then imagine his distress when he comes to them but they cannot make any difference to his son. This man has had his hopes massively raised, and then cruelly dashed. Some might have responded by giving up the whole thing as a con and walking away, labelling Jesus a charlatan. But this man to his credit, does not do that. He recognises that the failure of the follower is not the same as the failure of the master and comes directly to Jesus as he descends the mountain. He kneels before him in humility and asks for mercy.

Jesus, like he often does in these situations, seems to totally ignore the man's request! Instead he speaks to the disciples. Just like he described Peter's response to him as "satanic" at the end of chapter 16 so now calls the disciples as an "unbelieving and perverse generation" and wonders out loud how long he can possibly put up with them. Which makes you wonder if he's being a bit harsh – until you get to Jesus' explanation of **why** they couldn't drive it out.

They failed because they had "so little faith". Actually that's not really a very good way of putting it. Because, as Jesus points out straight after this, the problem isn't that their faith is too small. Because even the smallest faith is massively powerful. Mustard seeds were famous in 1st century Palestine for being small. Really that was the only thing that was significant about them – they were diddy.

And Jesus says that even this tiny little amount of faith is enough to do massive things. Of course people rarely actually want to move a mountain. But just as a mustard seed was proverbially small so a mountain was proverbially big.

The tiniest faith can do the biggest things. So the problem the disciples had can't have been that their faith was small. It would be better to translate the phrase "poor faith". The disciples' problem isn't that they don't have any faith. It is that their faith isn't very good. Their faith isn't rich – it's poor.

In fact the disciples have almost diagnosed their own problem in v19; they just don't realise it. Did you notice what their question was: "why couldn't **we** drive it out?" Think what the disciples are saying there: "We want to do this. We've been swanning around getting everyone to love us and admire us because we can perform amazing miracles. And now we can't do it any more. What's happened? Where's the magic gone?"

And Jesus is saying that they have totally failed to get it. This is not magic. And it's not about the disciples. It's about faith. And when Jesus talks about faith here he doesn't mean self-belief. Lots of sermons on this passage that I've been looking at this week analyse the problem here as the disciples having a crisis of confidence. What they need to do is rediscover their self-belief. What a load of nonsense!

What they need isn't a truck-load of self-belief. It's a mustard seed sized belief in Jesus. They need to stop having self-confidence and recognise that they can do this work of casting out demons because, and only because, Jesus has given them the authority to do it.

Following the real Jesus means that you will lose something. You will lose self-belief. Actually, when you think about it, that's inevitable isn't it. Because self-belief cannot possibly survive in the face of the realities that Jesus teaches.

If you believe the things that Jesus says – that you are a sinner in rebellion against God, that you deserve God's judgment, that your right place is destruction, that the God of all creation knows everything you have ever done and thought and said and is holy and powerful and righteous. If you believe the things Jesus says there is no way you will have self-belief. Because you will realise that your life hangs at the total mercy of God's sovereignty. That only the decision of God stands between any human being and eternal judgment. If you believe those things there's not much space for self-belief is there?

If you follow the real Jesus and believe the things he says you will lose something. You will lose self-belief. That was a lesson the disciples hadn't properly learned yet, which is why Jesus calls them unbelieving. And it was a lesson they should have learned – because they knew by now that Jesus was God's Messiah, his anointed King. That's why Jesus calls them perverse. If you follow the real Jesus you will lose something.

But you will also gain something. If you put your life in his hands you will gain all the power that he has. Nothing will be impossible for you, just as nothing is impossible for God. Fairly obviously that doesn't mean that absolutely nothing at all will be impossible for you. It doesn't mean that lifting a 10 tonne weight, practicing brain surgery or flying will all suddenly be opened up to you.

And it doesn't mean you will be able to be selfish, greedy or sinful – because all those things are

impossible for God so he's definitely not going to make them possible for us.

What it means is that as we trust Jesus all the things that he has empowered and commanded us to do will be possible. The disciples had been empowered and commanded to cast out demons and perform healings. As they trust Jesus they will be able to do those things.

Jesus has not given all his followers, all Christians, the power to cast out demons or do healings; so we shouldn't all expect to be able to do those things. But we should expect to be able to do all the things that he has empowered and commanded us to do. What are those things? Well there are quite a lot! Let me give you three examples ...

- Jesus has commanded us to make disciples – so we should be expecting to do that successfully.
- He has empowered us to reject sin – so we should be constantly turning away from sin
- He has commanded us to forgive others – so we should know that we will be able to forgive.

Now if you're like me your natural reaction to that list will be to feel a bit disappointed. To think you'd like a guarantee of success in finance, relationships and health instead. But when we think that what we demonstrate is exactly an attitude that says that we know better than Jesus which things really matter.

But Jesus is quite clear that the things he empowers his disciples to do, then and now, are the most important things for his kingdom. So we need to trust him, do them and recognise that even if making disciples, forgiving others and rejecting sin don't look like mountain moving they really are.

How we live as a Christian is fundamentally tied to who Jesus is – because if we don't trust in him we can't do what really matters, no matter how much we believe in ourselves.

Secondly if you follow the real Jesus...

2 You will die... and live (v22-23)

Once he has got all the disciples together again he reminds them of what he has said to them, probably just a few days earlier. When you look at what Jesus says and the disciples' response, it is quite bizarre.

"They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." The disciples went "Praise God! Hallelujah! Jesus will reign in victory over death." Only they didn't. Instead Matthew tells us, and he should know because he was one of them, they were filled with grief.

The disciples failed with the demon possessed boy because they didn't understand Jesus' power. Now they grieve at his announcement because they do not understand his mission.

I wonder if part of their sorrow is not just about what will happen to Jesus, though they are certainly devastated at the prospect of losing him, but is about what might happen to them. We'll see next week that the disciples were obsessed with which of them were going to be the greatest people after Jesus in his kingdom. If Jesus isn't going to be around how can they be great?

And it may be that they are also beginning to realise the implications of what Jesus has already taught them. If they are to follow him and he is going to die, what on earth will that mean for them?

We know, of course, that what it means is exactly what it appears to mean. Just like you can't get Jesus power without trusting him so you can't get Jesus' resurrection life without dying with him.

We might like the idea of power without cost, influence without responsibility but, Jesus says, that is not his way. And so it can't be our way either. Jesus is the king who dies. And he is the king who is raised. And if you want the raising you have to face the dying.

The right response, the way the disciples should have felt about what would happen to Jesus and, consequently, what they would face, is not grief but joy. Of course it is tragic that Jesus would be betrayed and murdered. But he will be raised to life. And that means that all the power, the mountain moving power, that Jesus possessed would not perish but be raised with him and continue to be available to those who trust him forever.

If you trust Jesus you will die. But you will also live; because all the things that really matter when you follow Jesus are kept for you by him. And he is alive.

pay not just for Jesus but for Peter too. In other words because Peter is with Jesus he is a son as well. Peter doesn't have to pay the temple tax either. The rules do not apply to him.

If you follow the real Jesus you are exempt from all sorts of rules and conventions of society and religion.

If you are a son in God's kingdom because you are with Jesus you don't have to live by anybody else's cultural rules.

- You don't have to be quiet in a church.
- You don't have to avoid pubs and clubs.
- You don't have to go to them.
- You don't have to like the things everyone else likes.
- You don't have to follow the opinions and tastes of your friends.

For some people here, brought up, as Peter was, in very conformist, conservative societies that probably sounds really scary. But it isn't. Following Jesus brings a wonderful freedom. It means you don't have to measure your value, your worth, your goodness and your life by the standards of all the people around you.

For most people here, brought up in societies where personal freedom is just about the only God we have, what Jesus says probably doesn't sound that radical. Of course I don't have to follow anybody else's cultural or religious rules. I am free to do what I want, whenever I like anytime at all, as the Soup Dragons sang.

Well if that's you... read on to v27! Jesus and Peter do pay the tax, even though they don't have to!

The way in which he gets the money has, not surprisingly, led to a lot of discussion! Why doesn't he just get some money out of the common purse? Or arrange for Peter to find the right coin lying on the ground? Why couldn't Peter just catch the fish and sell it and use the money from the fish to pay the tax? In fact Matthew doesn't even tell us whether Peter did go and catch the fish and find the coin – though I'm sure he did.

And hang on a minute. You might remember that one of the things we've said before here at Christ Church is that Jesus never uses his miraculous powers for his own benefit. Isn't that what he's doing here?

Well we can't be exactly sure why Jesus chooses this method for paying the tax. I suspect it's to do with the fact that Peter is a fisherman. He's saying; yes Peter you are exempt, as a son, from paying. But you still live in the same world as

everybody else and have a job like everyone else so Peter, use the skills you have to catch the fish and pay the tax. And Jesus isn't using his miraculous powers here for his own benefit; because, remember, he doesn't have to pay the tax! He's doing this so as not to offend other people.

So what's the point of the story? Well Jesus doesn't believe in power without responsibility. Because of who he is, the son of the king, he doesn't have to pay the tax. But because of who he is, the loving son of the loving God, he chooses to pay so as not to be a stumbling block to others.

True freedom, the freedom to be a son of God because you are a follower of Jesus, recognises that you don't have to follow everybody else's cultural and religious rules; and then chooses to follow them anyway so as not to offend people.

What does that mean for us? It means that Christians should be just like everybody else. Not in matters where God has told us to be different. But in matters of cultural taste and preference Christians ought to behave like everybody else; even when we don't want to.

That's the challenge isn't it? We like the idea of Christians being allowed to do what everybody else does – go to pub and coffee shops, wear similar clothes, go on holiday to the same places etc etc as long as it's what we want to do.

But that is not how Jesus used his freedom. Jesus used his freedom to fit in. He used his freedom to do things he didn't want to do and didn't have to do – paying the temple tax – so that he could gain a hearing for his message.

So if we want to follow Jesus we will use our Christian freedom to fit in with the interests of others in order to win a hearing for Jesus' message.

Let me give you an example. Everyone in your office that you are trying to get to know and talk to about Jesus loves Kelly Clarkson and is going to see her at the Liverpool Arena on 9th February, cost £29.12. You love Bach and would like to go to the concert at the Philharmonic that week where they are playing his concerto in F minor, cost £34. You can't afford both. What do you do?

Well just like the temple tax it isn't a moral issue. You don't have to go to one thing or the other. Christians are free to choose pop or classical. But the direction of Jesus' life is that he uses his freedom to fit in with those around him

wherever possible so that he can win a hearing for his message.

And if we follow Jesus the direction of our lives is that we will choose to pay, even if we know our freedom means we are exempt. You might not like the culture of the place where God has put you; your department, ward, staff room or office. And it's easy to dismiss all the things you don't like as evil or sinful or just a "waste of time and money". But the truth is that very often those things are not evil or sinful or wasteful. They are just things you don't like.

And Jesus calls his followers to embrace things they don't like in order to win a hearing for his message. That's what he does – is it what we do?

In the end you see Jesus doesn't believe in power or freedom without responsibility. Because that's not how he lives. And true Christian freedom, the freedom to be the person God wants you to be, is fundamentally tied to who Jesus is.

The disciples failed because they were not dependent on his power, they grieved because they did not get his mission and Peter answered wrongly about the tax because he did not see the implication of Jesus' identity.

Don't be like the disciples this week. Follow the real Jesus. Make the Jesus who dies and lives your king. Put your whole trust in him. And, like him, put what you want to do with your freedom underneath your responsibility to love and serve others.

That is the way to find real power, real freedom and real life.

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