

Sermon - Jesus' Commitment and Compassion

You've probably heard of the coronavirus outbreak by now, which has been spreading across the globe, causing a worldwide health crisis. I'm from Singapore, which currently has 130 confirmed cases of the virus, and our government has raised the disease outbreak alert level to its second-highest level. The virus has become a source of intense pressure and uncertainty among Singaporeans, and observing the news, I've found it interesting that there seem to be two general responses to the virus. One response shows the ugly side of our selfishness: you may have seen pictures of panic buying wiping out the shelves of grocery stores in the US, and even here, and many Singaporeans too have flocked to supermarkets to hoard basic necessities. What's even worse is that this rush to get stuff has meant that queues have also become incredibly long, involving hour-long waits, and some impatient Singaporeans have inconsiderately left their overflowing shopping baskets on the floor and walked out of the shops. On the other hand, there are also heartwarming stories of people giving out face masks and installing hand sanitiser dispensers in communal areas. Of course, we can't forget the tireless work that medical staff have put in to diagnose, research, and treat the disease.

It seems that when people are under pressure, they often reveal their true colours, both good and bad. And so is the case with Jesus in today's passage. In this part of his journey towards the Cross, he was facing rising opposition from the authorities and people in power, as well as rejection from the very people he came to serve. But it is in the face of this pressure that we see Jesus' character: his unwavering commitment to his mission and his unwavering compassion for his people. We saw last week that Jesus resolved to head towards Jerusalem, and this week we see how his resolve remains constant under pressure.

Jesus' Unwavering Commitment (vv31-33)

First, we look at Jesus' unwavering commitment. This story starts with some Pharisees warning Jesus to leave the area as Herod wanted to kill him. Jesus was probably somewhere en route from Galilee to Jerusalem, and may have been in the region of Perea, which is east of the Jordan and part of the region that Herod governed. Just before this, Jesus had been illustrating what the kingdom of God is like, and he is now being confronted with a kingdom of man. Imagine how you would respond to a threat like this: "Get away from here, for the ruler of this region wants to kill you!" Jesus' response is incredible and unexpected for a number of reasons.

> *Danger doesn't faze Jesus*

He begins by calling Herod a "fox". Herod was a tetrarch of the Roman Empire, meaning he ruled over about a quarter of it, and we know that he was powerful enough that he could kill off John the Baptist to honour a promise to his daughter. But Jesus isn't particularly respectful in his address of Herod, even in the face of this threat. Our natural response to danger is probably to run away, as the Pharisees suggested Jesus do. But this wasn't Jesus' response. He knew that God was in control, and that God's sovereignty and power trumped even Herod's. And so the threat of Herod couldn't stop Jesus, who continued to do what he had planned to do all along.

> *Jesus' mission is clear*

In Jesus' message to Herod, he says, "I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal." Herein lies the next surprise: Jesus is set on his mission. Despite the threat to his life, Jesus was fixated on his ministry on the earth, and continued caring for the demon-possessed and the ill. He had already been tending to these people, and his message to Herod says that he will "keep on" doing so regardless of what Herod attempts to do. Jesus' persistence and determination shows his mindset towards the people—that he loves

them and cares for them in spite of the threats on his life. And Jesus is certain to accomplish it—he says that he will reach his goal on the third day, having completed what he intended to do.

> *Death was already on the agenda*

But Jesus has saved the biggest surprise for last. He says, “surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!” Jesus is on his way towards Jerusalem, which would be outside of Herod’s jurisdiction, but he was heading there already, rather than changing his plans due to the threat from Herod. And Jesus says that death is already on the agenda! He knows that his purpose on the earth is to bear the sins of the world, and to die on the Cross so that man’s debt can be paid and we can be reconciled with God. Herod’s threats of killing him are ineffective because dying is exactly what Jesus came to the earth to do! Nonetheless, Jesus says that he must die in Jerusalem, because that is where the Sanhedrin is. They were the Jewish religious authority of the day, and were the ones who would accuse people of being false prophets, heretics, and blasphemers—as they would later accuse Jesus. And Jesus knew that this was in store for him, but remained committed to his mission and his direction.

Being committed is really difficult. How many of us have made New Year’s resolutions? And now that we’re in March, how many of us are still committed to those resolutions? Commitment is difficult because it is costly. Somebody who was committed is Joseph Schooling. He’s a 24-year-old Singaporean, who at the age of 13 met his hero, the Olympic medallist Michael Phelps. He aimed to become an Olympic swimmer himself, and a year later went to the United States to train. In spite of the homesickness, the dietary restrictions, and the tough training regime, he persevered, and six years later he beat his hero in the 100m butterfly event at the Rio Olympics. His singleness of mind meant that he was willing to bear the cost in order to achieve his goal, just as Jesus’ singleness of mind meant that he committed to his mission regardless of the threats and dangers he faced.

And the wonderful truth is that Jesus is still committed to his people today. He hasn’t given up on us, and continues to watch over us. What an encouragement this is for us to press on, to persevere, and to run the race with the goal of winning the prize! As we live for him, we are certain to face opposition and pressure, but knowing that Jesus is committed to us means that we can follow in his footsteps and remain committed to him.

Jesus’ Unwavering Compassion (vv34–35)

Secondly, we see Jesus’ unwavering compassion. As Jesus thinks about Jerusalem, where he is headed, he laments over it as a representation of the nation of Israel. Jesus demonstrates his compassion as he compares the unfaithfulness of the nation, and his own faithful love towards them.

> *Jerusalem is unfaithful*

One one hand, the Israelites are the ones “who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you”. God’s attempts to send His message to the Jews were unsuccessful because they refused to listen to His messengers, and even put them to death. This is reminiscent of the Parable of the Wicked Tenants in Luke 20, in which a master planted a vineyard and rented it out to some tenants. When he sent servants to collect his share of the crop, the tenants beat up these servants and threw them out. Finally, the master sends his own son, expecting the tenants to respect him more. Instead, they kill him, hoping to gain his inheritance as theirs. Jesus says that the Pharisees and religious leaders are just like the wicked tenants, who only work towards their own gain and get rid of God’s servants, who spoke the truth against them. And Jesus says that they are going to kill him too, as the son of God. He is lamenting that the Jews have failed to recognise God’s messengers and God’s son, and will eventually answer for their actions when the master returns, which is when judgement

happens. The consequence of their rejection of God is that their house lay desolate—that their temple, while beautiful on the exterior, was merely a hollow shell as God withdrew His presence from them.

> *Jesus' love is generous*

But let's have a look at verse 34 again. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you..." How would you expect this sentence to end? I would have expected a condemnation of Jerusalem's wickedness, perhaps something like "You are a wicked and deceitful generation". But Jesus in his tender mercy says something radically different. He says that he longed to gather them as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings. When a mother hen spots the shadow of a bird of prey circling overhead, looking for an easy catch in the form of a helpless chick, she would make a special clucking sound to call her chicks to gather under her wings. She would then self-sacrificially shield her chicks with her wings, protecting them from the potential danger. Crucially, the chicks recognise that special clucking sound, and know to hide under the shadow of the hen's wings. Jesus' heartbreak for Israel is because they failed to recognise God's voice calling them to Himself, and chose not to submit themselves to the salvation which comes through Jesus. The words that Jesus says shows his emotional anguish and the faithfulness of his love: "how *often* I have *longed* to gather your children together"! The history of the nation of Israel demonstrates that God has attempted to draw them to Himself repeatedly, offering his reconciliation and his presence time and time again, and yet they continued to reject Him.

> *Jesus' concern is real*

In the face of Israel's rejection, Jesus also issues a warning. At the end of this story, Jesus offers a prophecy about himself—he says "you will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" This quote from Ps 118 was partly fulfilled at Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem, but it will be completely fulfilled at Jesus' second coming. On that day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is the Lord. That day will bring great salvation to those who have taken refuge under the shelter of his wings, but it will also bring great judgement against those who have chosen not to. Jesus has extended an invitation, but those who rejected him will experience the "desolation of their house", a separation from the presence of God—only this time it will be eternal. Jesus' compassion was expressed as a concern for the people, exhorting them to not reject him any longer, but to return to him.

And Jesus remains compassionate for us today. He still longs for all to come to him, and not have to face the alternative, which is an eternity separated from him. What about us? Do we have the same compassion for those around us? Do we long for them to come to know Jesus Christ as we too know him? Jesus' heart broke for those who rejected him, and as his followers we should have tender hearts that break for the same things as his.

Through these two verses we've seen how Jesus' compassion was unwavering even in the midst of rejection, anguish, and real concern. It's clear that compassion, like commitment, is also costly. I'm reminded of a story from my time in the army. All Singaporean boys have to serve for two years in the military, of which the first two months comprise basic military training. During this period, everyone is paired off, and you do just about everything with your buddy. My buddy was a quiet, unassuming guy called Sean. Once we were on a field camp, and after marching to the campsite with our heavy backpacks we had to dig a shellscape, which is a hole in the ground large enough to lie in. Everyone was complaining and whining because we were sweaty and tired, but Sean kept at it, and finished his shellscape quite quickly. It probably also helped that he wasn't a very tall fellow. But what I remember is that after he had finished, he went over to help the other members of our platoon with their shellscapes. He had no obligation to do that, and he was certainly worn

out from the exertion and deserved to rest because he'd finished his job. But his compassion and sense of camaraderie meant that he gave of himself to help the others.

We also know that Jesus gave of himself to serve others. We know how this story continues: Jesus does end up in Jerusalem, where he is unfairly trialled, mocked, tortured, and crucified on the Cross. Jesus demonstrated his commitment by choosing the Cross, and deciding “not [his] will, but [the Father’s] be done” (Luke 22:42). Jesus demonstrated his compassion by forgiving even those who persecuted and executed him, and by considering “the joy set before him” to be valuable enough to “endure the Cross” (Heb 12:2). And he dies. Like the mother hen, he stretched out his arms, and he bore the Father’s wrath so that we would not need to. But he then triumphantly rose again, defeating the threat that all of us have to face: death. And he will return as the king and the judge.

What does this mean for us? If you are a follower of Christ, Jesus’ unwavering commitment and compassion are a wonderful encouragement for us. We know that we can indeed seek refuge under his wings, and there we can find peace and comfort. And even as people continue to oppose Jesus’ mission today, we know that nothing can stop him from accomplishing his will. So, as we live in light of that reality, we don’t need to be worried or anxious when we’re under pressure, but we can trust in Jesus, who is constant and unwavering regardless of our circumstances. We are empowered to live with commitment to Jesus’ cause and compassion for people.

But some of us might not call ourselves followers of Christ. In that case, Jesus’ message is a challenge: he promises that he is coming again to rule as king, but before then he offers to gather us under his wings. And he leaves that choice up to us to make: we can choose to hear his voice and return to him, or we can reject him and turn away. Jesus’ desire is that all people draw near to him—that’s why he persevered in his mission, and that’s what his compassion is all about. Jesus calls out: “Come!” And perhaps today is the day to say yes to Jesus: “I will return to you and trust in your salvation.”

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