The Hard Sayings of Jesus by Robin Scott

Most of what the church does is **talk** - often in completely unearthed concepts – such as incarnation, substitutionary atonement, salvation, justification, sanctification, the relationship between faith and works, etc. It’s all metaphysics and theoretical ideas – and often very bad ideas at that!

Jesus – whether the synoptic Jesus with his parables and pithy sayings or the Johanine Jesus with his dialogues and mystical sayings – is trying to get people to wrestle with the nature of relationship with God and with a life-style which conveys the Kingdom.

There are some of Jesus’ sayings that we can read and applaud as wisdom. We generally feel that we’re “on top of” them – got the T-shirt - doing the stuff. But there are others which are too hot to touch and which don’t often appear in sermons. It’s some of those that I want to deal with today.

It seems to me that there is a subliminal level in preaching which is aimed at allowing people to feel reassured and comforted. Jesus is not really too challenging! He doesn’t have to mess up your life! A pastor likes to hear at the door the words, “That was a challenging sermon, vicar”, because then he knows he’s got the right balance between being bland and being disturbing. He hasn’t disturbed them – they’ll come back next week – and the next – and they’ll put some money in when it’s needed. There’s an unspoken contract between member and pastor over this issue of security.

As my little diagram shows, I guess there are probably four main aspects of the religious person’s security: family life, church life, sufficient money, and social status. And I guess it was the same in the time of Jesus.

*But we may not have picked up the fact that these are all things that Jesus challenges at their very roots.*

**Family** We applaud the drama of the visionary fishermen who leave all to follow Jesus. Wow!! But did we hear the words – “……leaving their father in the boat”? And what about their wives and children? Who’s going to support or parent them while the husbands go off on their spiritual adventure, risking all for “the Kingdom”?

If we think that was just a special circumstance, we need to hear Jesus saying, *“Those who come to me cannot be my disciples unless they love me more than they love father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and themselves as well.**Those who do not carry their own cross and come after me cannot be my disciples…… none of you can be my disciple unless you give up everything you have.”* (Lk 16.26ff)

He also renounces his own over-protective family and declares that those sitting listening to him are his real mother and brother and sisters. Or again, to his disciples he says (my rendering), “Don’t worry about the families and possessions you’ve left behind – there’s a hundred times more in the “coming age” – plus eternal life – plus some persecution” (Matt 19 / Mk 10)

**Church Life** Most of Jesus’ brushes with the religion of his day were very negative. He insists on breaking the “sacred cow” of Sabbath Observance, seeing it as an outward performance which actually brings people into bondage. He criticises the religious leaders – especially the conservative Pharisees with their obsession with law-based spirituality and their hypocritical twisting of the scriptures (see Matt 23). Arguably, his attitude to the Temple was actually his downfall. He both criticises its practices, accusing its leaders of turning God’s house into a den of thieves; and in the face of his disciples’ gobsmacked adulation, declares that it will all end up as a heap of rubble. And, moreover, that he himself is the real Temple! Wot??

**Money** Jesus refers to himself as having no place to lay his head. He seems to have been reliant on the services of others: Martha and Mary’s home, the rich women who followed as part of his wider disciple group, and so on. Ditto, presumably, most of his disciples. He sets up a black and white dualism with regard to money. “You can’t serve two masters – you can’t serve God and money – or “mammon”. Did you notice (I didn’t till I was reading for this paper) that in Matthew those words precede our much-loved words about the lilies of the fields and the birds of the air and how God cares for them (awwwwww – how sweet!). But the thrust of the passage as a whole is not so sweet. He’s saying that to have concern or anxiety over even basic things like what you will eat or wear is to be compromising with mammon – and you can’t serve God and mammon! To serve God you have to throw to the winds all concern about your needs; earnestly seek God’s Kingdom; and let God sort out the rest! That’s his unequivocal command.

So, when a young man comes to Jesus concerned that obeying the law from his youth up doesn’t seem to have resulted in any spiritual awakening, Jesus spots the problem. He’s rich! So, he tells him to throw it all at the poor and come and follow him. He goes on to declare that it’s easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye a needle (and no, it’s not a gate in Jerusalem!!) than for any rich person to enter the Kingdom of God. (And the kingdom of God isn’t “heaven when you die” – it’s getting into the life-giving spiritual dynamics of being rightly-aligned with God). So, you can’t crack the spiritual stuff while being rich! Preposterous. Eh??

**Social Standing**  The religious leaders of Jesus’ day were an elite club in contrast to whom the rest of society were “sinners” – those who failed to keep the “important” rituals of hand-washing, etc. Fascinated by Jesus, the club would sometimes invite him to meals where he could be questioned – or possibly tripped up (because he wasn’t one of the elite and needed to be put in his place). At one such gathering (Lk 14) Jesus first of all heals a man on the Sabbath; goes on to criticise the juggling for places of status at the table; and then tells his host that he shouldn’t invite to a meal his friends – who will only return the favour and keep it in the club – but should invite the crippled, lame and blind who can’t reward him. (But he *will* have blessings in heaven!) In response to a smart-Alex remark from a guest, Jesus goes on to suggest that when the “great banquet” in heaven takes place, the religious elite will be too busy with their pursuit of mammon to find time to come, and thus the heavenly banquet will be for the very sinners whom they so wholeheartedly despise!! (Nice one!!)

So where does all this leave *us* as followers of Jesus? We have seen a prima facie case that Jesus was anti-family, anti-church, anti-money and anti-social – and that following him required following his teaching and example on these issues – as if carrying a cross.

By contrast, the church of today is largely structured around being “family”; around maintaining acceptable doctrines; around constant anxiety over funding – much of it for the upkeep of outdated buildings; and around trying to maintain its place in the structure of today’s society. Its message is comfort and reassurance. *In* what sense are we being followers of the Jesus of the gospels? *In our church today might we have turned the kingdom of God into little more than an affirmation of mammon* – with all its *comfort and security*?

Now it’s easy to criticise the church and its outward form, but we might also ask….

Are we wrong to promote wholesome family life? How can that be a contradiction of the kingdom?

Are we wrong to uphold the historic doctrines and practices passed down to us and which have characterised the church through history?

Can we take seriously the idea of throwing all care to the winds (viewing care as a manifestation of mammon)? And why do we need to do that to seek the Kingdom of God? (And what is the Kingdom of God, anyway?)

Is it wrong to interact with the society around us, affirming many of its values – or should the church always stand out like a sore thumb as a community of irritating prophets, forever critiquing society and parliament?

And as individuals, how do we apply these Hard Sayings of Jesus to our lives? How do we handle Jesus’ prima facie contradiction of our natural inclination to feel secure?

I said above that in this regard things were probably just the same in Jesus day. That’s because this is a matter of human psychology – the longing to be buffered by family, church, financial security and social status - even if in the process we miss the cutting edge of the kingdom of God? Isn’t that what Jesus is pointing to when he says that from a human stance salvation is impossible – (but not for God)?

In fact, isn’t the meaning of the Kingdom precisely that Jesus is bringing in an *alternative* life-style based on a transformed picture of God – a Father-figure who is totally on our side and there to help us. This is the life Jesus modelled and which he commends to us. It is a life-style that draws from beyond what mammon and the human social-matrix can offer. It brings peace and deep union with God. **But** it comes with a massive price-tag. You have to be re-born, re-learn, find new ways with new people in new contexts.

It’s a deep concern to me that I might have spent 43 years in the ministry of the church either banging my head off a brick wall (for sure!) or just wasting my time altogether. Despite my convictions about progressive theology I sense that following Jesus is more about where my security lies. Do I have the courage to “leave the old man in the boat” and weather the scorn of family and friends? Does any of us? Is there just far too much to lose? If we look into our hearts, do we really find ourselves in any different place from the rich young ruler? “It hasn’t worked! What must I do to find eternal life?” Like him, might we go away sad – still in bondage to the “riches” we must lose to find the Kingdom!

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Points to Ponder

1. Have you (or anyone known to you) ever given away all your wealth and relied totally on God’s provision – even for food and clothing? What was it like? Where did the food and clothes come from?
2. Are we to take the words of Jesus (about family, church, money and social status) literally and universally? If not, can you provide a persuasive alternative way of interpreting his words?
3. Jesus may have led an ascetic life, but we’re clearly told that he and his disciples were supported by a group of rich women with powerful husbands. (Lk 8.1ff) Does this undermine his teaching? Can the world exist without wealth?
4. How do you understand the term “Kingdom of God”? What is Jesus talking about? What are the biggest obstacles to putting it first? What is the outcome when you do consciously put it first?
5. Where have you found conflicts between “seeking first the kingdom…” and the expectations of family, church, finance and social standing, etc? Try to give examples at both personal and church level if you can.