

13 Opposition

11: 14 – 54

The salvation of Israel and the world lies in the coming of God's rule. It is the fulfilment of promises going back to Israel's beginning in Abraham. Prophets from the time of Isaiah had spoken of the perfect rule of God to be brought about under a worthy King anointed by God. Others had seen that in God's strength and authority Israel would be affirmed, vindicated, rescued, and in the train of her salvation gentile nations too would come to know and worship God. It had long been expected, looked for and prayed for.

But, however they thought of it, the kingdom of God has come now not as a single event brought about by a manifestly transcendent power, but as a process of engagement and a series of events, so that something of the kingdom is already here, while the fullness of it is still to come. It's like the dawn, not like floodlights being switched on. It's like a crop growing, not like an ornamental bush being transplanted to location. It's like a bridge being built, not like a bridge being opened. The coming of the kingdom takes place in time, and how long it takes is a question that no one can answer, for we are still in the process of it.

What is surprising and distressing is the opposition to God's kingdom, not among the pagan gentiles, but in Israel itself. When salvation finally comes, many in Israel oppose it. Some opposed it in its simplest, most transparent and most compassionate manifestation.

Jesus had cast out the demon in a man who couldn't speak and immediately the man was able to speak again. We don't have to get hung up on arguments about whether the "demon" was a physical, psychological or spiritual condition in the man himself, or a separate, malevolent identity "possessing" him. Anyone who thinks that the man's healing is unremarkable if it is "only" a psychological condition, doesn't know the first thing about psychology. To set a man free from psychological or emotional blocks that are deep enough and strong enough to prevent him using the power of speech, is something more remarkable than the ejection of a merely alien force.

The man is liberated, saved from his crippling burden. He is able to speak, to communicate freely once more with people around him. But some of those who saw it said: "He is using the power of Beelzebul (the prince of

demons) to cast out demons.” They had seen enuf and heard enuf to know that Jesus and the kingdom he spoke of did not fit in with their expectations. He did not speak of God or salvation as they looked forward to it; so they had to discredit him, and it seems they were prepared to go to any lengths: “He uses the power of one demon to overthrow the others.”

Jesus brushed the accusation aside: if the kingdom of Satan is divided against itself, it's already collapsing. It's not as if Jesus had done something weird and difficult to understand, for they themselves had experts who cast out demons. If they admit the war against Satan, they should welcome Jesus' success. But something they boast of when their own followers accomplish it, is evil when Jesus does it, for they are afraid of his challenge and deny their need of the hand that Jesus holds out to them.

It is urgent they acknowledge God in his deeds, for if this is the finger of God¹ casting out Satan then the rule of God has begun among them. Jesus' actions are more than a demonstration of the power of God's kingdom; they are the beginning of that kingdom breaking into their lives with strength to carry everything before it. When a strong man, fully armed, guards his house, he keeps his property. But if someone stronger than him attacks and overthrows him, he loses it all. Now is their time to choose, to be for him or against him. They must work with him to gather the harvest or set themselves against God, scattering and spoiling God's work.

People were coming to him in very large numbers, but not everyone had the right attitude. Some were asking for signs, either because they wanted him to give some proof of his authority or just because they wanted to see something astonishing. But it's a wicked generation that asks for a sign – one that is not at all in tune with God. There was a time for signs, but it is not now. It makes no sense now to be asking for signs, when the very reality of the kingdom of God is breaking upon them. Now is the time for coming to terms with the reality, the rule of God to which every sign of their history has pointed. The time for signs is already in the past, and the only sign Jesus will give them is one from the past: the sign of the prophet Jonah.

Remember how Jonah preached to the city of Nineveh, and Nineveh repented.² Jesus now confronts them with the same call to repentance. Will they respond, or will the people of Nineveh be a judgement upon them?

¹ The “finger of God” created the stars (Psalm 8: 3) and brought punishment upon the Egyptians (Exodus 8: 15).

² Jonah ch 3

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If the Ninevites repented because the prophet Jonah spoke to them, what will be the judgement on those who do not repent when challenged by something greater than Jonah? When the dead rise for the day of judgement, it's the people of Nineveh who will be a judgement upon this generation of Israel. In the day of judgement, the Queen of Sheba will rise up to condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to seek the wisdom of Solomon, and here is something greater than Solomon.

There are those of us who cannot imagine Jesus speaking of condemnation. "Gentle Jesus meek and mild" speaks no harsh word, but only the most tender rebukes, and consolation. And there are those who find it all too easy to imagine Jesus, like some savage Jehovah, thundering condemnation on sinners. Luke will not let us rest with either picture. He has shown us the remarkable tenderness of Jesus, his compassion for the sick and disabled, his deep conviction of the mercy of God, prompt to forgive, his loving acceptance of the outcast and disgraced. But he shows us also where Jesus condemns. There are those who face the condemnation of God, and Jesus does not hesitate to give it voice.

It's important - very important - to notice who is condemned. In the first place, it's those who set themselves against the rule of God as it comes in the work of Jesus: those who reject that outreach, that mercy, that love, because it's not the way they want God to rule. It's those who, faced with this reality, ask for a sign; who are so sure that they don't need compassion, mercy or healing that, when they see it, instead of welcoming it with relief, they ask for its credentials.

And it is those who already have power in society and use it not to help but to suppress and control the weaker. It is particularly addressed to those who have that happy combination of wealth, expertise and "moral" authority, who are able to make and apply rules for others, dominating or excluding the weak so that they get stronger. It's those for whom the social etiquette works so well, with its relational, moral and religious sanctions, that they will defend it, even against God. It's those who vigorously uphold the Law, not because the Law is the way to justice and love of your neighbor, but because it gives them an arena of expertise in which they can dictate rules of behavior and so keep others in their place. It was the Pharisees, who had made such a fuss about Sabbath correctness and keeping sinners at bay, and now were making a fuss about meal-time conventions.

One of them had invited Jesus to dinner, and when he came, he sat down without completing the ritual of washing that Pharisees held to be correct. His host showed his surprise, and, the way Luke tells it, Jesus launched into a denunciation of the Pharisees' obsession with cleaning rituals. They

know how to maintain a facade of respectability (no doubt they believe in it themselves) but the reality underneath is extortion and wickedness. It is the very opposite of those soldiers and tax-collectors who repented at the preaching of John. These people pretend (or tell themselves) they are faithful adherents of the Law of God, meticulously paying their tithes – one tenth even of the bits of mint or parsley they cut from their gardens to garnish a meal – but they are indifferent to justice and the love of God.

We might wonder why Jesus didn't just carry out the proper rituals in the first place. After all, it's ordinary politeness to fit in with your host's sensitivities, even if you don't yourself consider them to be matters of great importance. I think that Jesus, who shared meals with all and sundry, saw this particular ritual as one of those distinctions which polite society used in order to make itself distinct, the rituals being a complicated affair which the busy and hard-pressed poor had time neither to learn nor to apply. Perhaps it involved implements and washing facilities which they couldn't afford.

What's more, the Pharisees gave their social etiquette a religious value. Because the Law did stipulate certain ritual washings and certain habits of cleanliness, they claimed that their rules were implementing the Law of God. It made them religiously as well as socially superior to the common and ignorant. Respect for his host notwithstanding, Jesus refused to enact this charade.

We're not told all the stages of the discussion, only where it ended up: with Jesus denouncing the practice of the Pharisees. They are obsessed with cleaning cups and dishes, (even on the outside!) hands, arms and elbows, but within themselves they are greedy and selfish, hoarding power and possessions, coveting status and their seats of honor at the synagogue. Instead of gathering respect and property to themselves, they should be giving, making alms of themselves and of all they have. If they did that, everything in their lives would be clean.

There were others at the party, one of whom, a lawyer, protested that in this sweeping condemnation Jesus also gave offense to those who were experts in the Law – an honourable profession. Once again, we're not given all the steps of the discussion, only Jesus' final position. The lawyers are no help to the poor and uneducated. Instead, they lay burdens of obligation on people who can hardly cope with what life gives them, and they do nothing to help them. In fact, by wrapping things up in mystification, they have prevented others from finding out what the true Law of God is. They don't want to know themselves, and they don't want others to know.

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Both the Pharisees and the lawyers could have protested that their concern for the Law was genuine. The Law was a beautiful thing, the very covenant of God and Israel's greatest privilege. They could have pointed to some of the psalms that showed an absolute love of the Law, especially the beautiful (and very long) Psalm 119. To be the people to whom the will of God was made known in all its details, so that they could live purely and blamelessly in his sight, was not to be compared with any other greatness. It was Israel's distinction, her defining character, and it was surely a noble thing to do, to guide other Israelites, the less fortunate, into behavior that as perfectly as possible fulfilled the Law.

But genuine love of the Law is love of the will of God: love of God and love of our neighbor, as Jesus and another lawyer had agreed.³ This is not demonstrated in the lives of the lawyers or the Pharisees, for such a love would have transformed their behavior, their craving for status and power in society, and the social order with it. Jesus reminds them that alongside the Law, there are also the prophets, who had again and again reminded Israel, especially when Israel didn't want to hear it, of these two things: Love of God, as total and exclusive loyalty to Yahweh their God, and love of their neighbor, in justice and fairness, compassion, generosity and sharing. The Law itself does not stand without the prophetic voice interpreting the will of God, generation to generation, in Israel's history.

Their ancestors had rejected the prophets. They had killed the prophets. (In fact, altho the Bible tells of the prophets being ridiculed, scorned, rejected, threatened, imprisoned or in other ways punished – the sufferings of Jeremiah particularly come to mind – there are few records of a prophet being put to death. Jesus seems to be using “prophet” to mean every good person who witnesses to the righteousness of God. So he names Abel, from the beginning of the Jewish Bible, and Zechariah, from its last pages.⁴) The Pharisees in particular honored the prophets (tho the Sadducees, the priests' party, did not accept the authority of their writings) and apparently built tombs to commemorate those who had been put to death by previous generations. Jesus ironically interpreted this tomb-building as confirming the actions of their ancestors. “This is how you approve your ancestors' work. They killed, and you build the tombs.”⁵

From this point on there was hostility between Jesus and the Pharisees. For the present, it was verbal: they determined to out-argue him, to catch him

³ See ch 10; Luke 10: 25 – 28

⁴ Genesis ch. 4; II Chronicles 24: 20 – 22 See Jerusalem Bible note on Matt. 23: 35

⁵ 11: 47 – 48

out and show him to be ignorant, unreliable or blasphemous. It may seem harmless enough, for who is really hurt by arguments? But to the Pharisees themselves it was deadly. It meant that they had finally closed their minds to him; for who really listens once they've made up their minds to prove an opponent wrong?

And this was no academic argument (savage as such arguments can be). At war were rival views of the will of God, authority and leadership in society, moral and civic status. The kingdom which Jesus was preaching gave no opportunity for that social control by which the elites of Israel maintained their dominance. I hope it is not even necessary to remind you, at this point, that this is not a merely "religious" argument with relevance only to individual relationships and private morality. Nor is it about another world and the destiny of human souls in a life after death. Both those things might be important, but they are not the cause of war between Jesus and the Pharisees. The Pharisees value their status as respected leaders of the social order; they will fight for the power their privileged position gives them as much as any feudal baron or bishop, as any noble or aristocrat, as any wealthy merchant or manufacturer, as any party manipulator or electable leader, as any successful investor, chairman of the board, or media mogul. And Jesus, whose mother had foreseen the mighty tumbling from their thrones, speaks of a kingdom that subverts all such power.