

# Woe, Woe and Thrice Woe

## Week 26 ~ Notes for September 11th

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### Background

| Subject           | Matt     | Mark | Luke    | John |
|-------------------|----------|------|---------|------|
| Woe to you!       | 11:16-24 |      | 7:31-35 |      |
| Jesus' invitation | 11:25-30 |      |         |      |

*Lamb of God, I look to Thee;*

*Thou shalt my example be:*

*Thou art gentle, meek and mild;*

*Thou wast once a little child.*

- From 'Gentle Jesus, Meek and Mild' by Charles Wesley

Well, this will be interesting....

Two thoughts spring to mind for me.

**Thought #1:** Tanya Luhrmann in her revealing book "[When God Talks Back](#)" relates the rise of [The Vineyard](#) and similar charismatic churches in the 1960s. She makes many references to the 'individualisation' of religious experience. With this individualisation comes a change in the way one views 'God'. Writing about the worship songs in such a church she says:

Here in these songs, the remarkable God of this kind of church shines forth. Rarely do you hear of his judgement; always you are aware of his love; never, ever, does a song suggest you might fear his anger. He is a person: lover, father, of course, but more remarkably, friend. Best friend.

One song begins with breathless amazement that God pays attention to the singer, thinks of the singer, loves him or her... Some songs are rousing, and people punch at the air with their hands: "Blessed be the name of the Lord!" or "Shout to the earth his name!". These are songs to drive with and dance with and clean the house with. But mostly these are songs to cry with: songs about perfect idyllic friendship in a most imperfect world...

This God is intensely human in this music, and the singer wants him so badly that the lyrics sound like a teenage fan's longing for a teen idol she can touch.

(When God Talks Back, p4-5 )

**Thought #2:** Subscribers to the Telegram Virtual Vestry group will have seen the excellent and spirited discussion on the correct translation of Mark 1:41 in which Jesus heals a leper. Is it

*"Then Jesus, **moved with compassion**, stretched out His hand and touched him..."? (NKJV)*

Or should it be

*"Jesus was **indignant**. He reached out his hand and touched the man"?* (NIV)

Do you choose a translation based on your view of Christ? Christ the 'hippie', the 'best friend'? Or Christ the avenger?

## **Discussion**

### **Woe**

This week we come to a passage recounted by Matthew and Luke where Jesus seems much more keen on judgement than he does on being friendly. "To what can I compare this generation?" he laments. Verse 17 seems to be a quote (from where I could not establish) likening this generation to petulant children. Jesus compares the actions of John and himself and concludes that he just can't win. Then in v20 comes the famous "Woe..." rebuke to Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. The latter really gets it. A comparison with Sodom in which Sodom comes out best will never feature in the Capernaum Tourist Board's publicity material.

Read carefully the "Woe" passage in Matthew 11:20-24:

- Did Jesus *really* mean it? Is he sending Capernaum to hell?
- Or is Jesus being somehow human? Is his human frustration spilling over?
- Is frustration a divine attribute?

### **Compare and Contrast...**

A common idea is that the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament appear to be very different. It would be hard to imagine that the attendees of the worship service described by Luhrmann, above, give any thought to the God of the second Commandment who promises the children of those who worship idols punishment for four generations.

- Do you think it can be difficult to square the pictures of God in the OT and the NT? Why? Why not?
- I recall learning the 10 Commandments as a child and feeling that the second one was, quite simply, unfair. Was my 10-year-old self wrong? Explain! Even better, explain as you would to a 10-year-old.

### **But I like...**

In 'Thought #2', above, I asked if your preferred translation of Mark 1:41 is dependent on your view of Jesus. How would you argue that it *isn't*? Alden Thompson, in his excellent

book "[Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?](#)" puts forward the idea (paraphrased badly by me) that if you find some parts of the OT at best baffling and at worse genocidal, then you simply ignore those parts. Pay attention to those sections of the Bible that are helpful to you in your practical life and trust that somehow the 'bad' bits will make sense at some point.

- What do you think of that approach to the 'difficult' parts of the Bible?
- Be honest! How much of your personal Biblical interpretation is [confirmation bias](#)?

### 'Un-Woe'

The next passage in Matthew contains one of my favourite and most quoted texts: "For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" says Jesus. Yes! Sign me up for that!

But before we get there we have vv25-27; a fascinating claim that Jesus is the "locus of all revelation. Whatever revelation there may be, dispersed in human intellect and values, the centre of all God's self-disclosure is Jesus of Nazareth" ([Green](#), p132).

Michael Green outlines 5 claims made in this passage:

1. God the Father conceals and reveals according to his will
2. Jesus is the representative of the Father
3. Only the Father fully understands Jesus
4. Only Jesus fully understands the Father
5. Because Jesus shares the Father's nature as well as ours, he and he alone can reveal the Father

There you have it in a nutshell. And what does this mean? See vv28-30. "Come to me" says Jesus...

### And finally...

- Do you think the "Come to me..." invitation in vv28-30 somehow contradicts, or maybe even negates, the "Woe..." in vv20-24? Are the citizens of Capernaum also included in this invitation?
- Like the citizens of Capernaum, if you don't do the Right Thing then you will be punished. Last week we discussed the tricky topic of healing. Do you think that God punishes the unwell? Or even more simply - does God punish at all?
- Some Christian commentators consider the religion of Christianity to have been 'feminised' over the past 50 years or so. They reference the activities described by Luhrmann, above, as evidence that the person of Jesus is more 'meek and mild' than 'bringer of judgement'. In some quarters there is a backlash to this - an attempt is made to muscularise Christ and to promote 'judgement' over 'meek and mild'. What do you think? Has Jesus been 'feminised' in contemporary Christian culture? And as an aside, what do you think of the use of the word 'feminised' at all in this context?
- In the last few years there has arisen, particularly in the USA, a particular type of [Christian Nationalism](#) with an authoritarian bent. In a recent New York Times piece, "[When Dictators Find God](#)", David Brooks argues that Putin, Xi Jinping *et al* are practitioners of "spiritually coated authoritarianism". "These religiously cloaked authoritarians have naturally provoked an anti-religious backlash among those who

understandably now associate religion with authoritarianism, nativism and general thuggishness."

- How, exactly, did religion become associated with "authoritarianism, nativism and general thuggishness"?
- In the culture wars between the 'masculine' and 'feminine' (please note the heavy use of air quotes!) Jesus where do you lie?
- How do you feel about strong-man leaders using Christianity to support their views?

See you on Sabbath!

Steve