

Seeing Things New

Readings: Gen 17:1-7, 15-16; Mark 8:31-38

In 1999 the directing duo the Wachowski Brothers made one of the most influential movies of the decade – The Matrix. The Matrix follows a man named Thomas Anderson. Anderson goes to work every day in his generic office job, but at night he sits in his apartment and hacks computers, stealing information and selling it on. One day government agents burst into Anderson’s workplace seeking to arrest him. But Anderson receives a cell phone call from a mysterious man who identifies himself as Morpheus. Morpheus talks Anderson through an escape plan through the office with an uncanny ability to know where the agents are in relation to Anderson. Anderson is later taken to meet this enigmatic Morpheus. And here we have one of the most famous scenes from the movie. Morpheus holds out his hands with a pill in each hand – one red, one blue – and instructs Anderson to choose one. Both will result in Anderson falling asleep but with different effects. Taking the blue pill will result in Anderson waking up in his apartment and going back to his normal, comfortable life. Taking the red pill, however, will allow Anderson to see the world as it really is but he can never go back. Upon taking the red pill our hero learns that his whole life has been a lie. He learns that he has lived his whole life in a computer simulation – a video game of sorts – called the Matrix and that all humans are living in this reality. He learns that in the real world the humans built robots that eventually rebelled against the humans and plugged every human into the Matrix. Humans go on believing they are living normal lives when in reality they are living in one big dream while the robots farm their bodies. Morpheus, as it turns out, is a leader in a group of freedom fighters who have escaped the Matrix and are now trying to rescue the rest of humanity from it. The film was a phenomenal hit with audiences. The film made \$463.5 million dollars at the box office and spawned two sequel films. People started talking about “taking the red pill”. Virtually every hip youth pastor wrote sermons about finding Jesus in the film – something that was made easy by the film’s heavy use of Christian symbolism. People were in love with this idea of there being a reality you just needed to wake up and see. Of seeing the world in a new way. Of being part of a battle fighting the secret powers of darkness. And they saw hope in the messiah figure of Thomas Anderson. And the idea of a messiah figure is something we find in the bible but what is it?

The big cultural and political hot topic of Jesus’ day was Make Israel Great Again. Israel had once been a mighty nation in a promised land. But their disobedience caused them to be vomited out of the land for their sins. In particular they were judged for their idolatry – making idols, adopting pagan customs, turning away from God - and for rampant injustice – cheating others out of their land, murder, trampling on the poor and widowed, etc.

The dominant vision for Making Israel Great Again was the hope of the coming messiah. And the expectation would be that the messiah would be a conquering hero who would ride into Jerusalem and overthrow the Romans. But most importantly, the messiah would usher in the Messianic Age – a time of peace in which the nations will come to learn from Israel about the goodness of God. And best of all, if you were in the messiah’s inner circle he would promote you to positions of great importance when he took his reign.

And this brings us to today’s gospel reading in which Peter screws up for the billionth time. But first some literary context. The four verses before today’s reading deal with the disciples’ realisation of

who Jesus is. Jesus and his disciples are wandering around Philippi – a region quite far from Jerusalem. Jesus asks his disciples who the people say he is. The disciples reply, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” And then Jesus puts them on the spot. But who do **you** say I am? Peter speaks up, “You are the Messiah”.

Yes! Go Peter! You finally got something right!

But Jesus commands his disciples to keep his identity a secret and we’ll soon see why.

Imagine the excitement that the disciples would have felt with this realisation. This wasn’t just any rabbi they were following. This was the messiah! They likely knew he was heading to Jerusalem so they can put a big tick next to that box. And they’re friends of the messiah. That means that they’re going to go from being nobodies to being the very elite of society.

But then Jesus starts to tell them what will happen. How the religious elite will reject him upon entering Jerusalem. About how instead of conquering the Romans he will be killed before rising again three days later. Oh. Oh dear.

So Peter takes him aside to correct him. Maybe Jesus misremembered the criteria for the messiah. Maybe it’s just a really hot day and Jesus is a bit confused from dehydration. So Peter begins to rebuke Jesus for misunderstanding what it means to be the messiah. He wants to help Jesus get with the program. But Jesus replies “Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.” Ouch! Imagine having the teacher you have dedicated your life to following say that you are his arch-adversary.

“You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.”

Peter has this whole idea built up in his head from his dominant culture of what Jesus should be and he’s awkwardly trying to fit Jesus into this mould. But Jesus refuses to be put into this mould. Jesus is here to turn everything upside down. There’s this sense in which Peter is thinking too small. He’s focused on a nationalistic agenda and sees Jesus as a tool for political power. But Jesus is offering something so much more. Jesus is offering the Kingdom of God. It’s a kingdom that’s bigger, better, and more wonderful than any human kingdom can ever hope to be.

And this is a Kingdom we often miss out on because we shrink the Gospel down and miss the point of it because of our cultural blinders. Western thinking has been greatly influenced by Greek thinking and in Greek thinking the physical world was bad and flawed while the spiritual realm was good and desirable. And so over time the gospel became solely about escaping this world and going to heaven. Or hell. There are stories of the famous Protestant preacher Jonathan Edwards whipping people into such a fear of hell that they would faint in the aisles and cling to the pews with white knuckles to avoid being dragged into hell. We have shrunk the gospel to something that is simply about life after death. But Jesus seems to be more concerned with life before death. And we see this in both his teaching and his miracles. Casting out demons. Healing the sick. Restoring sight to the blind. Saving a woman from execution. Forgiving sins. Exhorting his followers to care for the vulnerable. Admonishing them to avoid revenge. These are all expressions of Jesus being for life in the here and in the now.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”

Now let’s talk about what Jesus is saying in this rather challenging passage. First off, in the historical context he is clearly talking about physical death and more specifically being willing to die for the gospel. The cross didn’t have the same symbolism it has today. People often refer to their misfortunes, chronic illnesses, and disabilities as their cross to bear. This isn’t what Jesus is talking about. In first century Palestine the cross is purely a symbol of death. It does carry the connotations of humiliation, dehumanisation, and the destruction and exile of the social self, but it’s through the manner of death that this happens. And Jesus is calling people to voluntarily subject themselves to it.

Now in New Zealand, or in any other country where Christianity has held a normalised place, it is very unlikely that you are going to be killed for your faith. No one is going to kick down the door of this church with a gun and ask you if believe in God. So what does this look like for us? Is it a passage we can just ignore as not having any relevance for us? Well... no. We don’t get off the hook that easily. Consider Jesus’ next statement “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” That one is very relevant for world that runs on greed, status, and power.

We have looked at the idea of life before death and now I suggest we need to look at its counterpoint: death before death.

Recently I’ve been reading through *The Passion for Life* by Jürgen Moltmann. You may remember him from my sermon on the Holocaust and the suffering God in which I unpacked his theology in depth. Writing in 1978 he writes of what he sees as being the biggest problem facing society: apathy. Apathy which rises up and chokes hope like thorns choking seeds so that they can bear no fruit. And people end up bitter, cynical, and hopeless. And he writes “The worst thing is that one gradually becomes used to it.”¹ We grow used to suffering and evil and withdraw from it and become indifferent to it. We isolate ourselves from others in order to ignore their suffering and in doing so we experience a social death of our place in the community.

Take, for example, the latest school shooting that happened in Florida, America on 14th February in which a young man walked into a school with an AR-15 assault rifle and murdered 17 people. How many people saw the story on the news and thought “another shooting”. And the aftermath of the shooting followed a predictable script: Republican politicians sent out “their thoughts and prayers” while lamenting that it was a senseless tragedy; these were met by outraged people pointing out that thoughts and prayers are worthless. Memes are shared showing how much these politicians received in campaign donations from the NRA and what legislation those politicians voted against that could have made it harder for the perpetrator to get their hands on the particular gun they used. Think pieces are published in all the major media outlets analysing why this happened: was it mental health? The surge of violent White nationalism? The lack of gun control? Not enough guns in

¹ Jürgen Moltmann, *Passion of Life: A Messianic Lifestyle* (Fortress, 1978), loc98.

society? Is it because God isn't allowed in schools? Was it negligent parenting? One political commentator I follow commented

*"But in the big picture what upsets me the most is how so many people are either actively pushing or sitting back and being content with this sort of thing just being normal; being normalised. I commented on two other school shootings just a few weeks ago where I said the worst part is that in the United States we have gotten to this point where school shootings they're just something that happens. And we don't even really speak in terms of trying to stop it... It occurs to me that the only thing most people agree on when a school shooting like this happens is that there's going to be another one before too long."*²

The worst thing is that one gradually becomes used to it.

When I first started writing the above section of the sermon I had no idea how I was going to put a positive spin on it. Witnessing America's endless string of school shootings feels pretty draining. But then I found hope in the survivors. Out of the suffering a group of students arose who banded together, grieved together, and comforted each other. But they didn't stop there. They said "we will not stop until this problem is solved. We will not be ignored". They held rallies at the state Capitol building, confronted NRA spokespeople, and even debated a pro-gun presidential candidate on television. The backlash was ugly. Pro-gun politicians accused these teenagers of being paid-off by political rivals, of being skilled actors, of being too young to know what they were talking about. But they persisted.

The following verse came to mind while watching one of these survivors speak out: "Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity." – 1 Timothy 4:12

Now Paul is referring to young Christians here. I do not know how many of those youth identify as Christian but I do know how many of the pro-gun politicians do. So maybe God does raise stones to cry out sometimes.

And while we may not suffer from idolatry of guns in New Zealand we do have idols in our society. Our society is in love with the idols of success, money, work, etc. And when these idols are what you live for they demand a heavy sacrifice. Moltmann notes that we become melancholic, insensitive, and we smile only because we are expected to smile to keep up the illusion of having it all together. In his words "We become apathetic, still alive but slowly and surely dying inwardly."³

When we become apathetic we stop caring about those for whom the sacrifice these idols demand is just too much. Consider that in our neoliberal society everything is commodified – including people. If you can't work – either because of disability or lack of employment – you are seen as a drain on society. Consider how much time was spent in the lead up to our last election on bashing beneficiaries. And I say from my own experience on government welfare, and from talking to others in similar situations, that it is an incredibly dehumanising experience. When we view people simply as commodities we accelerate the death in our society.

² Steve Shives "It's About the Guns"

³ Jurgen Moltmann, *Passion of Life: A Messianic Lifestyle* (Fortress, 1978), loc131.

Rather we are called to preach a full gospel – a gospel that teaches that all humans are made in the Image of a God that loves us as the flawed and fallible humans we are. A God who calls us out of death and to life before death through Jesus. So may we be like those courageous young people who refuse get used to the death and darkness. May we be like those young people who refuse to be ignored when they speak out against evil and suffering. May we model love and life through our community of faith.