

God's way often surprises us - but leads to victory

Intro me

Last week, Ed helped us see that Jesus declares himself greater than great King David, greater than the Holy Temple, greater even than the Sabbath, that central feature of Jewish identity. He's making some serious claims - it almost feels like he's puffing out his chest in front of the Pharisees. And then to top it all off, right in their face, he heals the man's withered hand, demonstrating the truth of his claims.

So when their seething hatred **overflows** into plotting and planning how they can kill Jesus, how do you expect this great and powerful king to respond?

Matthew 12:14 NIV

But the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus.

To double down, to round on them and attack with words? To bring that mighty power he demonstrated in the healing to bear against his enemies?

Well, who's seen Monty Python's Holy Grail - incidentally one of my favourite movies of all time? If you know it, what actually happens is more like that scene where the French in the castle are taunting those English k-nig-uhts most fiercely ("your father smells of elderberries") and then they attack with a cow-ta-pult: King Arthur commands **action**:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ey0wvGiAH9g&ab_channel=TomScruffyCammarata 2:49

Charge! Charge! Jesus looks like he's so fed up with the Pharisees, he's setting up for a fight, a confrontation. He takes it right to the edge, rubbing their noses in it with a provocative healing. And then.. as they begin to plot how they might kill Jesus, instead of all that charge! charge! All of a sudden it's "run away! run away" - here's how today's passage begins: **Mt 12:15**

| Matthew 12:15 (NIV)

| Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place.

What is Jesus doing? Is he not up for a fight? Does he lack the confidence, the courage to face his enemies head on when the chips are down? What sort of leader, what sort of King, what sort of Messiah would just withdraw?

Well that, I think, is the big point our gospel writer Matthew wants us to consider as he continues telling the story of Jesus. So let's listen together - and remember, the set-up here is Jesus confronting the Pharisees, and them responding by plotting

how they might kill him.

Andrea is reading for us this morning and we're in Matthew chapter 12, starting at verse 15. Page 977 in our blue bibles and we're in chapter 12 - look for the big 12, then verse 15, look for the tiny 15. Page 977.

Andrea, **over to you**. [get off stage]

Matthew 12:15–21 NIV

Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. A large crowd followed him, and he healed all who were ill. He warned them not to tell others about him. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope."

Thanks Andrea. Now Ed introduced us to the **fill-in notes** built into our app. I've put some of those together for you again today if you want to open that up and follow along - Just go to respond, then notes. It automatically saves them alongside the talk video so you can go back to it later if you want.

So why is it charge! charge! and then run away! run away! Why is Jesus asking even those he heals not to speak about him? Well, Matthew tells us these odd-seeming behaviours are **Mt 12:17**

Matthew 12:17 NIV

This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

To fulfil what God had revealed to his chosen prophet over 700 years earlier. Now this is not the first time our gospel-writer Matthew has told us we're seeing ancient prophecy fulfilled in the life of Jesus - this is the fourth time a prophecy from Isaiah is quoted as fulfilled. But here the way this works is a little different.

First time I read this, I was thinking mostly about how strange it is that Jesus doesn't want the people to tell others about him. **Mt 12:16** - that does seem very odd given we make a big point of trying to be a church where we know it's everyone's job to try and share the good news about Jesus - everywhere we find ourselves, and in everyday ways. And given back in chapter 10 Jesus sent his 12 key followers out to publicly announce the same good news to the whole of ancient Israel.

Matthew 12:16 NIV

He warned them not to tell others about him.

I was reading this prophecy as being mainly about the secrecy that suddenly seems to be Jesus' plan. Here's the thing, though: if you look back to the previous fulfilments of prophecy, you'll see they are very focused. Our writer quotes just the slice of the prophecy that's relevant, nothing more.

Here, we get the longest quotation from Isaiah in Matthew's gospel. If Matthew was

just trying to show us that Jesus commands this surprising secrecy in keeping with the prophecies about him, well we'd just get the middle slice of what he has for us here: **Mt 12:19**

Matthew 12:19 NIV

He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets.

Instead we get a much bigger quotation. Why? I think it's because Matthew is answering a much bigger question than just "why all this secrecy?" - Matthew is answering the same question we saw John asking a few weeks back: **Mt 11:3** is Jesus really "The One"? Could he really be the chosen one, the promised one, the Messiah? With his surprising secrecy; with his surprising withdraw; with the surprising people he hangs around; with the surprising things he teaches. *Is Jesus really The One?*

| Matthew 11:3 (NIV)

| "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

And this is a big question because Jesus isn't what they were expecting - far from it. They were expecting a great warrior-king who'd deal a crushing defeat to ancient Israel's enemies, foreign and domestic. A new and better King David. Not someone who backs away from a fight like Jesus does here.

But it's a big question for us too because, let's face it - Jesus often doesn't do things the way we'd expect either... Nor the way we'd do them... Nor the way we'd like to see them done. I think there is a mix here for the original audience and for us not just of expectations we have for how God works - but also for the way we'd dearly love God to work in our lives and in our world. **God's way often surprises us.**

The quotation Matthew gives us here is about so much more than just this surprising secrecy. That's because Matthew's trying to show us that, despite these surprises, Jesus is doing exactly what God said he would; working in exactly the way God said he would; and, importantly, he will also accomplish exactly what God said he would.

God's way often surprises us - but it leads to victory

So I want to quickly take this prophecy apart to show you what these different phrases mean about the *one* Jesus is, the *end* Jesus will accomplish, and then the *way* Jesus will work. Don't worry - we'll get to talking about what this all means for us here and now - but we have to understand what Matthew is showing us better first.

So, **who** is this prophecy about?

| Matthew 12:18 (NIV)

| "Here is my servant whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight

A chosen servant. Now if you looked at the Jews' translation of this prophecy from around the time of Jesus, they understood *themselves* to be this 'servant' character: the people of God - they went so far as to translate the Hebrew word for servant as

"Israel". Our author, Matthew, is following the original ancient Hebrew instead; it's a chosen servant who's in view - and of course Matthew wants us to see Jesus as that chosen servant.

One I love, in whom I delight - that should make us think back to Jesus' baptism where God the Father declares exactly this over his son, confirming Jesus as this servant: **Mt 3:16-17**

Matthew 3:16-17 NIV

As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

So what does it mean for Jesus to be a servant? That, as **Philippians 2:5-8** tells us, rather than going his own way, even though he could have by right, he was humbly obedient to God's plans - obedient despite what it would cost him: ultimately his life.

Philippians 2:5-8 NIV

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

The one: Jesus, the chosen, obedient servant, the beloved son. That's where this prophecy starts - but what about where it ends? **Mt 12:20-21**

| Matthew 12:20-21 (NIV)

| ... till he has brought justice through to victory. In his name the nations will put their hope."

Now the phrasing here is a bit weird: bringing justice to victory isn't something we'd ever say. And the word translated 'justice' is a little hard to capture in English too; it can mean a legal judgement against someone: condemned or innocent; or it can refer to the activity of judging people - but there's a third sense used here: 'the administration of what is right and fair'. The phrasing is a bit odd, but the idea the prophecy is getting across is clear: finally, Jesus will make everything right. He will bring the Kingdom of God - God's right and perfect rule, truly and fully lived out.

And notice the end of the quote here: he'll make everything right - and the nations, not just the Jews, will put their hope in this Jesus. This is where everything is going.

Ok, so the one: Jesus, the obedient servant; the end: everything made right. But what about the way? This is the biggest surprise Matthew has for us: **Mt 12:18**

| Matthew 12:18 (NIV)

| I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations.

Thinking back to Jesus' baptism again, remember we saw the Spirit of God "descending and alighting" on him, confirming Jesus as the one. And as we'll see in next week's passage, Jesus himself tells us it is by the Spirit of God that he drives out demons, and, we presume, co-works his other wonders.

Along with these wonders worked, Jesus declares and announces to the world what it means, for everything to be made right - that same word, translated 'justice' - what it would look like. If you were with us last year, think back to Jesus' famous teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. That is exactly what Jesus was setting out to his disciples - and through their writings, to the world too: what it looks like when everything is made right, when his Kingdom comes.

Ok so Jesus works powerful signs by the Spirit and declares with authority what his Kingdom will look like. So far, so good. We've definitely seen both of these in the story so far - and they're not massively surprising as the way he will bring about this end. Then we get the surprise: **Mt 12:18-20**

| Matthew 12:18–20 (NIV)

| I will put my Spirit on him, and he will proclaim justice to the nations. He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out

He'll do this quietly and gently. That's the big sense of this section. Obviously it's not literal - people have heard Jesus' voice. He's argued with the Pharisees - we just saw that last week. Even within the prophecy itself, it couldn't be literal - he couldn't both proclaim justice to the nations and be heard by no-one. It's like when a teacher tells the class 'no-one is listening to me' - yet a child hears; it's like poetry, giving a sense for something.

What the prophecy is getting across is the surprising way Jesus will go about accomplishing his mission, a way that's radically different to what people were expecting. He's not all bluster, walking into the centres of power, confronting the high and mighty. He's not choosing the busiest street corners to maximise his visibility and setting out his stall.

Jesus mostly works gently, at the margins, in the more remote parts of the land. That's how he'll get his mission done. And that is not what anyone was expecting of the promised one. Remember how we started today 'run away! run away!' A conquering Messiah who backs away from a fight? Remember the call to secrecy? A great King who doesn't care for the limelight?!

Jesus' way is very surprising - *but just as it was prophesied*. He mostly works gently at the margins. And that second part about **bruised reeds and smouldering wicks?** Jesus works mostly with, and through, the broken, the struggling. That's what those pictures are.

See, a reed has some strength, some use while it's straight [have one?]; but once it's bent, it's weak, useless. A well-trimmed lamp burns brightly and consistently; but a smouldering wick pictures one that's damaged or running out of oil, almost

extinguished.

Jesus doesn't cast aside or just ignore the weak, the struggling. It's quite the opposite: that's who Jesus works with - works through, even. Jesus' way is quiet; Jesus' way is at the margins; Jesus' way is gentle; Jesus' way is with the broken and the weak.

The one. The end. The way - the surprising way. I've taken a long time to get here so thanks for sticking with me but now we've laid all these foundations, worked our way through it, time for the question we always like to ask at Hope City: so what? What does this mean for you and me, here and now?

We need to hear the same message the original readers would have: **God's way often surprises us - but it leads to victory.** We need to hear this when we don't get why God is doing what he is doing. When we think we see him withdraw, not advance. When we don't get who God is working with. When we see him at the margins, not the centre of power. When there seems to be little to see, little to say. Still he'll bring justice through to victory. Still in his name the nations will put their hope.

And I started thinking about this idea, I started to see so many places this is true.

God's church advances through persecution. A few years back we were following the story of the very first churches. We saw it was persecution which first scattered the church from Jerusalem - and that spread the good news of Jesus across the ancient world as a result. We know in many places today where the church is harshly persecuted, it grows still more strongly. Who would have thought that could be God's way?

God's church advances through weakness, through doubters. Think of the story of Peter - claiming not to know Jesus three times in one night, weak with fear; deserting Jesus on his darkest day yet also the rock on which Jesus built his church. Today the majority of the advance of God's church isn't through superstars and experts, but through ordinary believers, weak and doubting. Who would have thought that could be God's way?

God's Kingdom advances through suffering. Think of the cross - the conquering Messiah dying on a criminal's cross. Yet through the cross Jesus opened the way for each one of us broken people to be forgiven and transformed. Who would have thought that could be God's way?

So what? **This calls for humility** before God as we try and make sense of what's going on in our world; as we try and make sense of what's going on in our own lives. God's way often surprises us - but we must not reject it because God's way will lead to victory.

There are many in our church who are suffering - physically, mentally. What does this mean for you? Don't write off your suffering as something under God's radar, out of his sight; don't write it off as senseless, or making you so weak you're useless; don't write it off as something which could never be a part of God's plan. God's way

often surprises us. Try and listen to Him in it, listen for Him in it. See God's surprising way led to, and through, the cross. Have faith that God's surprising way leads to victory still.

There are many in our church who feel weak and who struggle - wrestling with doubt; disappointed by our own failures; weak in resolve. What does this mean for you? "a bruised reed he will not break and a smouldering wick he will not snuff out." God's heart goes out to the weak and the struggling. God's Kingdom advances through the weak and struggling. God's way often surprises us. Try and listen for His gentle care and comfort in it. Try and listen for His quiet call through it. See God's surprising way as his Church advanced through the weak and doubters. Have faith that God's surprising way leads to victory still.

There are many in our church who are confused about what's going on in the world, about what's going on in our own lives - feeling our world is out of control, surprised by our own unexpected disappointments. What does this mean for you? Don't wallow and lose hope, writing things off as disaster - or jump to conclusions about what a twist or turn means. Don't presume this could never be a part of God's plan. God's way often surprises us. Try and follow Him through it. Try and listen for Him in it. See God's plan for His people, for His Kingdom, so often advanced through unexpected difficulties, through surprising turns. Have faith that God's surprising way leads to victory still.

This calls for humility when things don't seem to make sense - **and invites us to humbly learn God's ways**. Our writer, Matthew, shows us one path for that: to humbly search the Scriptures. The Pharisees knew the Scriptures back to front, word for word - but still they didn't recognise God's way in Jesus when he came. Why? because they didn't read humbly listening for God's voice, seeking to know more of God's heart.

What did they make of this prophecy? Surely they had read it. Perhaps they didn't get it, so they just ignored it. Perhaps they didn't like it, so they just chucked it out - or worse still, twisted it until they did. When we read, we can easily do exactly these same things.

Or we can come humbly to Scripture, seeking God's heart, God's ways, revealed through it; come ready to be surprised by God, open to what he will reveal by his Spirit through his living Word. Maybe that is something God is calling you to focus on especially this week as you read?

We should finish where our reading finishes, though. **God's way often surprises us - but it leads to victory**. The nations will put their hope in Jesus' name - that's exactly what's happening here, in this room, two thousand years on. And all over our world. And he's not going to stop or give up until he's "brought justice through to victory" - until he's made everything right.

Now, if I can ask our band to come back up, today we're going to take some time to quietly reflect while our musicians play and sing over us, asking God by his Spirit to be specially present and at work. If this isn't yet your faith, or it just seems weird,

don't worry - use the time to stop and reflect on what we read and said.

If you believe in a Living God who's present with us by his Spirit, why not humbly invite him to help you better see God's way? We'll put some prompts up on the screen which might help - if there's something already on your heart, just focus on that. Ellyn; musicians; **thanks**.

- What's going on in your life that doesn't seem to make sense?
 - Humbly ask God what he's doing there.
- What have you read or learned about God that you struggle with?
 - Ask God for clarity, and for humility.
- Who do you know feels weak, or is struggling?
 - Bring them to God, remembering He cares, and works through such ones.
- What surprising ways of God are brought to your mind?
 - Praise him for them.

communion transition -> the cross the great surprise at the heart of the gospel