

Isaiah describes a teacher – a dedicated, persistent messenger – who is subjected to all manner of mischief on account of the message they convey. God’s message, as it happens, is not always well received.

Spitting, hair-pulling, and worse – physical violence is to be endured (or perhaps can only be endured???) by those who carry this paradigm-shifting vision of God’s glorious, peaceable, unimaginable reign.

So unimaginable, that humans would rather not think about it until ‘after.’

Afterlife – after the physical stops being a concern – then we’re happy to let God take over; happy to imagine constant choirs of praise – endless streets of gold. But the message – in both testaments – concerns the here and now, and here and now, that message meets resistance or misinterpretation, or (often enough) violence.

Isaiah’s conclusion is simple enough; this ‘blessed messenger’ (whoever it may be) is going to need to trust God, because that messenger is going to face plenty of trouble. That’s life, but with God you will prevail. Good news, Isaiah style.

Jesus’ approach is always a little more...direct.

This is the second time in short order we’ve heard Jesus say things like this (remember Matthew’s take on it from Matthew chapter 10? Not peace, but a sword – he said. Brother against brother, he said. Face the truth (take up your cross) and follow me in SPITE of all this, he said.

These moments when Jesus ‘talks plainly’; whether to chastise Peter, or remind his disciples (again) that the road ahead of them is full of pitfalls – in those moments our understanding of the promises of pearly gates and joyous choirs of angels is brought up against reality, and it’s hard to know what to do.

Peter's declaration that '[Jesus] is the Messiah' is, on the one hand, a hopeful, joy-filled statement of faith. The long-awaited, anointed one stands right in front of this transformed fisherman. The baggage that God's people then (and now) attach to the title Peter give to Jesus is considerable. Kings were anointed ones – so were priests and occasionally prophets (check this) God's anointed was asked – on more than one occasion – to establish rule in God's name – to drive out the invader – to bring the attention of the wandering faithful back to God. Saul. David. Solomon – all messiah (Hebrew for anointed). And the mythology that developed around the ultimate anointed one becomes hard to imagine. Messiah would return all the lost tribes to the promised land. Messiah would establish the heavenly kingdom on earth – it's capital would (of course) be Jerusalem. Messiah would lead armies and conquer enemies and bring God's vengeance to humanity. A fearsome and formidable personage.

And Jesus says 'No.'

The Messiah is described as 'son of man' – in other words, vulnerable. Human - whose powers would only stir up the powerful against him. No wonder Peter is astounded. No wonder he tries to shout Jesus down. Peter's expectations (along with everyone else's) are being ripped to shreds by Jesus' suggestion.

And Jesus calls their objections the devil's work.

Even now we offer the wrong kind of glory to the one we call Messiah. Jesus is too often hailed as a solution – the solution – to everything that ails us. "All you need is Jesus" they say, as though Jesus' existence alone sets the world right.

Jesus changes things alright – Jesus changes minds and hearts and lives, one at a time. And that change in us provokes reactions in others.

To imagine, like Peter did, that the change Jesus brings to the world is universally welcomed (or wanted) – or worse, to assume that Jesus is returning as some sort of conquering battlefield commander drenched in glory – both of these ideas are devilish in their origins.

Resistance to change is what humans are famous for. And bloody, 'end-of-time' battles are the desire of humans desperate to cling to power.

God's power – the power that raised Jesus from the dead – move people toward mercy, compassion, justice and eventually, peace.

The life Jesus asks us to give up is a life devoted to the status quo; to power that persecutes; to mercy only for allies; to revenge and retribution. The values we cultivate in spite of God's care for us.

Losing a life like that for Jesus' sake – speaking out against the human inclination to choose sides and punish enemies – draws fire from those who find safety in the status quo. To say, this week especially, that you will remember the events of September 11, 2001 not just for the horror of the day, but for the horrors those events unleashed on the world; that you will remember the terrible persecution of innocent Muslims – remember the pointlessness of revenge – remember the cost of all kinds of hatred – to ask people to remember in that way is to invite an argument. But revenge didn't save anyone; retribution hasn't made anyone safer.

Lose that life, says Jesus, and take up the cause of real justice – recognize the divine spark in our shared humanity and stop vilifying those who look, speak, act, think and worship differently. Don't be ashamed of the peaceful path – don't be ashamed of an inclination towards mercy and justice. Honour those things that Jesus demonstrated and God will be honoured and the world will be changed.

It's not easy. It is not without risk. Letting go of our stranglehold on 'the way things are (or were)' is the hardest thing in the world. The reward for letting go – the reward for 'denying ourselves' and shouldering the cross of compassion and grace – is worth it.