

JESUS UNDER STRESS

*A sermon given at the Mornington and Glenaven Methodist churches
on Sunday 28 February.*

We often think of Jesus, that model for our own lives, as living in a state of perpetual calm—a calm which we are totally incapable of matching.

That's the Jesus of the 'peace, be still' command, given as the little fishing boat in which and his disciples were sailing across the Sea of Galilee was tossing wildly in one of the sudden windstorms which whirl in from the surrounding desert and whip up the surface of the water into considerable waves. Magically, the wind dropped, the waves flattened out, and the boat was able to sail calmly on to its destination, leaving the disciples to wonder who was this man who could control even the forces of nature.

That's the Jesus, confronted by the desperate disciples with the news that the huge crowd around them is getting very tired and hungry (no nearby supermarkets in those days), who quietly tells them to use the pathetic little bits of food they had found, five fish and two loaves of bread, and get on with the business of feeding them all.

That's the Jesus who offers others his own sense of personal peace as a precious gift: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.'

That's the Jesus who told his village and farmer listeners, 'Come to me, all of you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.'

So was he really not like us at all? Did he never lose his cool? Never react under stress with an angry word, even an explosive, violent action? (Remember Peter doing just that, and being quietly told to put away his fisherman's knife.)

The **Gnostics** believed that the outer, physical Jesus was just a human look-alike, a shell for the perfect spirit, the completely divine, untroubled, otherworldly soul within. But more orthodox Christians have

always struggled to understand how such a person as the Jesus of the gospels could be at the same time a full human personality, born into the physical world as we are, fully experiencing that world as we do, yet a divine being, the Son of a perfect, all-knowing, all-loving God.

What do the gospels tell us, imperfect record that they are? Do they ever show us a Jesus under stress? Even under the stresses we know all too much about?

I'm in no doubt that Christ was frequently under stress. Considerable stress.

From his own family, as Joseph sees the next generation, his oldest boy walking away from his father's trade; as Mary (like any modern Mum and her teen-age children) sees him heading off and becoming distant, unapproachable. When she turns up with the rest of the family and demands that he come out and at least see and speak to them, she is given only a message. And of course he knows and *feels* what he has done: he voices it in that piece of bravado: 'Who are my brothers and who is my mother? Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.' Really? Sounds good, but does it ring true to human experience?

From his **physical circumstances** as a teacher, a guru, travelling well beyond his district, without a home base or any guarantee of regular food or shelter. He said once, bitterly, '**Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head.**'

From his **cultural circumstances** as a man in a conquered country, rent by violent terrorist attacks and punitive massacres, friction between the resisters and the collaborators, life under a regime that determined their movements, savagely taxed their purses, and compelled daily obedience to the hated, heathen soldiers of Rome. Maybe Palestine in Jesus' time was more like modern Syria than we can comprehend. You walked carefully or you were dead—cut down or strung up on a cross.

From the leaders of his own faith, the teachers of the law, the nit-picking theologians of his time. I wonder if his heart rate went up whenever he spotted a Pharisee or Scribe (easily identified by their dress) among the next crowd gathered to hear him speak. Waiting to criticize, waiting to catch him out in an unpatriotic remark (the coin), an

illegal action (the wheat field), a subversive attitude, disrespect for the Law. For a moment he cracks under the weight of it all: 'Hypocrites', he snarls back at them. 'Pharisees and teachers of the Law. You shut the door to the kingdom of heaven in people's faces! You never go in yourselves and you don't let those who are trying do so! Woe to you. You are like white-washed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead people's bones and every kind of uncleanness!'

And he is totally shocked by what he now sees in the Temple. A noisy, greedy commercial operation, sucking money out of the worshippers rich and poor alike and turning the House of God (as he said) into a den of thieves. There, for once, he *does* lose it. Can you visualize, hear the tinkle of coins and the angry yells as the money-changers' tables go over, as the bird cages crash to the floor?

From the **petty quarrels and disagreements among his own supporters** (the kitchen disagreement between Mary and Martha, the argument between Peter and John over who was to be top dog in heaven, the sheer knuckle-headedness of his chosen group (what was *that* story really about, master?), the problem of Peter's impetuosity, the growing threat of betrayal by Judas)

From the never-ending **pressure, the physical exhaustion of dealing with the crowds**: the flood of sheer human misery brought to his feet, the wrenching personal losses (Lazarus is dead), the disappointments (the rich young ruler'), the ingratitude (the ten lepers), the unexpected angles from which they came—the roof torn off, a Roman officer appealing for help, a desperate woman reaching out to touch him...I wonder how many others did the same.

Huge psychological stress as Jesus wrestled with himself to know himself and his mission, surrounded by all the positive and negative images others were determined to impose on him. Messiah? Miracle worker? God on earth? Heretic? Law-breaker? Samaritan lover? Leper toucher? Friend of prostitutes and tax-gatherers? Yes, and the usual personal *who am I* stresses, that all of us have always gone through, within and outside our family. Remember how he asks Peter what *they* are saying about who he is. He gets the 'right' answer, from Peter, of course— but isn't there an element of insecurity in a person who needs to ask about his own public image?

HYMN

Well, what did Jesus do to cope with the undoubted stresses in his own life. Did he have ways of coping with the pressures on his own life? Can we pick up any clues that might help us with our own difficulties?

Would you have a brief conversation about that. What do you think Jesus did to relieve the pressure on and within himself? Can you think of actions or attitudes that might have helped even this calmest of people to keep his cool? And if that's too hard, what techniques do you have to cope with stress.

- He *confronts his demons* in the wilderness or at the gates of Jerusalem ('he set his face').
- He *gets away from the crowd* (even his own disciples) and makes some private space that is his alone.
- He *shares his inner life* with a circle of close friends (disciples, women)
- He devotes himself to action: he doesn't recoil in on himself and allow despair and inertia to take over. This is a powerful act of will.
- He deliberately *refrains from outright confrontation* on his opponents' terms. His reactions do not up the emotional stakes, they dampen them.
- He opens up and *sustains a deep conversation* with 'his father'. I think that was one of the greatest gifts that Joseph ever left him—the absolute trust that he would he heard and understood no matter what he brought to the conversation. You might also call this the first *confessional* life that we know about. Or the first continual prayer-life.
- He gives himself *times of relaxation*: he is a *social being*, not a solitary creature, enjoying other people's marriage ceremonies, visiting friends like Mary and Martha, accepting invitations to dine out.
- He acts calm and talks calm: calm and peace are a major part of his communication with others. (The woman taken in adultery, the feeding of the five thousand, the stance before Pilate).
- Very occasionally he *lets off emotional steam*, like an engine whose boiler is about to blow.
- He does a lot of *walking* (everybody in his situation had to do so in those days), and Jesus tirelessly travels through his

own district, his own country and across the border in the country of the Samaritans. Plenty of time to let the emotional pressures dissipate, and the sun and the bird song to take over.

- He *shares in worship* with his own people in local synagogues and at the Jerusalem Temple (their cathedral church): sometimes participates by reading the scriptures and preaching, too. We can be sure he sang the psalms as they all did: he takes them into his mind and heart. He creates his own prayers. He remains a part of his community of faith.
- He *organizes* his life as best he can: there are no unstructured wanderings, his journey to Jerusalem is mapped out before he goes to the city, he sets out a clear plan for his disciples to follow as they spread out through the surrounding villages—if it doesn't work, move on, he tells them. When the unexpected breaks into such a well-ordered life its impact is much blunted.
- He *looks after others* in stressful situations—that's a powerful way of relieving one's own stress. *Who will comfort Toffle?*
- At the end of his life, in dreadful torment, he directs John to care for his mother, he *surrenders himself* into God's hands (a hard-won self-gifting this, if you remember his cries of desolation and despair at Gethsemane and on the cross).

Let's pull it all together

I began by saying that we often think of Jesus, that model for our own lives, as living in a state of perpetual calm—a calm which we are totally incapable of matching.

I think the gospel evidence is that he lived a life as full of stress as any of those we know about—including our own personal lives.

But Jesus, behaving like any sensible and determined person *controls* that stress, *avoids it* where he can. Lives with it and works through it, using commonsense and some ageless human techniques to do so.

If we are under stress and strain (or in contact with others who are), let us turn to his model again. As he himself said, there is much to learn from him.