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21 February – the 1st Sunday in Lent

JESUS: THE MAN WITH A HEART (Matthew 11:28-30)

1 What is Jesus' heart?

The four Gospels contain 89 chapters. There is much about Jesus' teaching, travels, prayer habits, speeches, how he believed himself to be the fulfilment of the Old Testament. About all these things and more, thousands of pages have been written by theologians over the past 2,000 years. **But there is only one place where Jesus tells us about his own heart – Mat 11:28-30.** In summary, he says, **"I am gentle and lowly in heart."** (v.29)

2 What does 'heart' mean in the Bible?

It is 'the central animating centre of all we do ... It is our motivation headquarters ... it is the centre of all we do. Our hearts are what define and direct us ... the heart drives all we do. It is who we are.' (pp.18-19)

3 What does it mean to say that Jesus is 'gentle'?

The word 'gentle' occurs just three other times in the New Testament – **Mat 5:5; 21:5; 1Pet 3:4.** *"Meek. Humble. Gentle. Jesus is not trigger-happy. Not harsh, reactionary, easily exasperated. He is the most understanding person in the universe."* (p. 19)

4 What does it mean to say that Jesus is 'lowly'?

The meaning overlaps with that of 'gentle' – the two words together giving us a single reality about Jesus' heart. In the New Testament, 'lowly' means humble in the sense of being poor, destitute, being

thrust downward by life's circumstances, socially unimpressive, *'those who are not the life of the party, but rather cause the host to cringe when they show up'* (p.20). See also **Lk 1:52** – God exalts those 'of humble estate'; **Rom 12:16**.

'The point of saying that Jesus is lowly is that he is ACCESSIBLE. For all his resplendent glory and dazzling holiness, no one in human history has been more approachable than Jesus Christ.' (p.20)

5 How can we come to Jesus?

'The minimum bar to be enfolded into the embrace of Jesus is simply: open yourself up to him ... You don't have to unburden or collect yourself and then come to Jesus. Your very burden is what qualifies you to come. No payment is required: He says 'I will give you rest.' His rest is gift, not transaction.' (pp.20-21)

Whether you are trying hard to make your life work ('labour') or passively finding yourself weighed down by events outside your control ('heavy-laden'), Jesus wants you to find rest and has greater concern for you to come in out of the storm than you do.

Jesus is 'tender, open, welcoming, accommodating, understanding, willing.' (p.21)

This is who Jesus wants to be for all who come to him, who take his yoke upon them, who cry to him for help.

But 'Gentle and Lowly' does not mean mushy and frothy' – see Mat 11:21, 24. But for those who are repentant, *'his heart of gentle embrace is never outmatched by our sins and foibles and insecurities and doubts and anxieties and failures. Gentleness is who he is. It is his heart.'* (p.21)

6 Living the Christian life does often need work

Jesus himself says this (Mat 5:19-20; 18:8-9), and see also 1Cor 15:10; Phil 2:12-13, Col 1:29. *'But all Christian toil flows from fellowship with a living Christ whose transcending, defining reality is:*

gentle and lowly' (p.22). Jesus does not promise a life free of pain or hardship.

But all those who find the Christian life difficult and hard will find that Jesus' yoke is kind and that his burden is light. *That is, his yoke is a nonyoke, and his burden is a nonburden. What helium does to a balloon, Jesus' yoke does to his followers. We are buoyed along in life by his endless gentleness and supremely accessible lowliness ... He never tires of sweeping us into his tender embrace. It is his very heart. It is what gets him out of bed in the morning.'* (p. 23)

7 How do you think of Jesus?

Often we don't think of Jesus like this. If God has highly exalted him so that one day every knee will bow to him in submission (Phil 2:9-11), if he is the great creator and Lord, and if the description of him in Rev 1:14-16 is true, does he really want to come close to us sinners, we who are unworthy and unclean? Or, if he does come close, does he not hold his nose?

Yet the verses in Matthew 11 say that this high and holy Christ *'does not cringe at reaching out and touching dirty sinners and numbed sufferers. Such embrace is precisely what he loves to do'* (p.24). Let's not picture the risen Christ approaching us with 'a severe and sour disposition'. Rather may we see from the Bible that Jesus' heart is perfectly gentle and lowly. This is who he truly is. He himself said so.

He invites us to bask and enjoy his heart. And there is just one thing for us to do: **'Come to me'**. Go to him, open yourself up to him. If you knew his heart, you would! *'Your anguish is his home. Go to him'*. (p.216)

Tom Wright's paraphrase of Mat 11:28-30

"Are you having a real struggle? Come to me! Are you carrying a big load on your back? Come to me – I'll give you a rest! Pick up my yoke and put it on; take lessons from me, I'll be gentle with you! The last thing in my heart is to give you a hard time. You'll see – rest you need, and rest you shall have. My yoke is easy to wear, my load is easy to bear."

Discussion Questions

1. What are your perceptions, your natural instinct, of who Jesus is and what he is like?
How does that impact your relationship with him?
2. From Mat 11:28-30, what phrases strike you most? Why?
3. What does the open-ended invitation to come to Jesus say to you about his heart?
4. In what ways does the gentleness and lowliness of Jesus invite us into knowing him more?
5. What things in life do you find most burdensome?
What would you say (or what do you say) to Jesus about those burdens if you took them to him in prayer?
After reflecting on the heart of Jesus, what hope are you able to have in him?
6. The word 'lowly' in the New Testament means humble, poor, having a low social position.
Would you be happy to be described in this way?
Does it surprise you to know that Jesus described himself in this way?
What does this word suggest about our relationship with Jesus?
7. Read Psalm 55:2. What does this verse suggest that we should do with our cares and burdens?

These studies are based on the book *Gentle and Lowly* by Dane Ortlund.