

Pick a side

Luke 11:14-32

What kind of films do you like? Call me childish, but I like the Marvel movies - especially the Avengers films. One that came out this year was Captain America: Civil War. For those who haven't seen it, the large band of superheroes that had been acting together side by side are split by a decision that each one of them has to make.

World governments have come together to say that the Avengers must no longer act without supervision and accountability to those in charge. There's been too much collateral damage, too many people and cities destroyed whilst they've been battling those that only they could battle.

The Avengers are called on to sign up to being limited and controlled by an authority above them. Some of them sign, believing that they need this to be a responsible force for good in the world. And some of them refuse to sign, claiming that being limited in this way is going to stop them from doing what they need to do to keep the world safe.

Inevitably, it leads the Avengers to being split in two - those who will sign, and those who won't. And there's conflict between the two sides unfolding throughout the film.

Here's the point - the decision that each Avenger had to make was a straight choice between two things. Sign, or don't sign. Submit, or don't submit. There was no fence to sit on. There were only two sides here, no middle ground. And a call had to be made.

In Luke 11:14-32, Jesus explains speaks to the gathering crowds around Him, crowds made up of all sorts of people with all sorts of reactions to Him. And what He has to say is this: There is a conflict going on. A conflict in which there are only two sides, and no middle ground or fence to sit on. And every human being needs to pick a side.

In v.14, we read about a miracle taking place. Jesus drives a demon out of a man. But the reporting of that incredible miracle is over after one verse. From the end of that verse right through to the rest of the passage, Luke is more concerned with writing about people's various reactions to what Jesus is doing, and what Jesus has to say in response.

In vv.14-16, we read about three reactions to Jesus and what He's up to. Many are amazed. Some don't like what they're seeing, and attribute Jesus' actions to evil influences. And some think they haven't seen enough yet; they're watching and waiting for a sign to make it clear. So we've got the impressed, the hostile, and the unconvinced.

From vv.17-32, Jesus addresses each of these three groups. And although He's got something a bit different to say to each one of them, which we'll see as we go through Jesus' words; He's basically got one thing to say to each of them: 'Listen to what I'm telling you, and act on it. There's a battle for human lives on. Pick a side. Pick me.'

Jesus starts by addressing the hostile group in His audience, in vv.17-23. These people are saying that Jesus is performing miracles like releasing people from evil spirits, because He Himself is acting with the Devil's power. 'Jesus isn't God's servant,' they say, 'He's the Devil's servant!'

Jesus begins His response by showing up their logic as complete nonsense. The way the Greek is written, it has the sense of, 'Right. Let's think about what you've just said...' Jesus says, 'If Satan is driving out demons, then he's divided against himself, isn't he? And his kingdom will collapse.'

A divided kingdom will fall. That's another premise in Captain America: Civil War. The baddies in the film are plotting things with this very idea in their minds - if they can get the Avengers to turn on one another and bring each other down, they'll collapse. Simple as that.

Jesus points out that it's just foolish logic that His hostile audience is banding about in the public sphere of that crowd. And the same thing still happens today.

One of the arguments that the New Atheists like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris make about 'religion' is that it's an evil influence in this world. They, too, are saying that investing yourself in Jesus should be rejected because the evil of institutional power and control is what drives it, and the evil of war, division, sectarianism and prejudice is what results from it.

But there's a logical problem for today's hostile crowd, too. On what basis can they call anything 'evil'? What *is* evil? Is it a spiritual reality? Surely they'd deny that. Is it a majority vote from the culture in each time and place? Surely that's all relative; just shifting sand, so that nobody can ever definitively say that religion (or anything else for that matter) is evil.

When Jesus responds to His hostile audience, He challenges their faulty logic. But He does affirm that the evil they're talking about is real. What Jesus says is, 'there's evil alright, but let's get this straight: I'm not *with* Satan, I'm against him - more than that, I've already beaten him.'

In vv.19-20, Jesus highlights the two conclusions people can come to about who He is and what He's up to. And there's only two conclusions, because there are only two sides. 'Am I driving out demons by the power of Satan, or by the finger of God?' There's no third option, no third party. Only these two cosmic powers, absolutely opposed to one another.

And Jesus makes it clear in vv.21-23 which side is the winning one. The 'strong man' in this picture is the Devil - guarding fiercely the people he's got hold of. But the stronger man who attacks him, overpowers him, and disarms him completely, ransacking his house and claiming the people who were captive in it, is Jesus.

Jesus is saying here, 'Make no mistake, I am absolutely opposed to the powers of evil in this world. And make no mistake, I am setting people free from them. I will have the victory over Satan - he's got nothing on me. So think about this carefully, everyone - pick a side. Are you going to let me liberate you, or are you staying under Satan's roof? It's one or the other.'

Jesus says in v.20, 'But if I drive out demons by the finger of God, then the Kingdom of God has come to you.' If... then... It's a logical statement. If Jesus really does this stuff; and if He's doing it by *God's* power - then God's rule as King has arrived with Jesus. That's what you need to respond to. If Jesus isn't evil, then are you going to bow the knee to Him, and make Jesus King of your life instead of you?

Is there such a thing as evil? Is Jesus evil? Why or why not?

Jesus finishes addressing the hostile, and starts addressing the impressed, in vv.23-26. Here's what Jesus says in v.23 - it's the key sentence that stresses Jesus' call to you to pick a side...

'He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.' Are you with Jesus or against Him? It's one or the other. There's no middle ground.

Those who are hostile to Jesus, and to the idea of following Him, get that they are against Him - don't they? I mean, these people *get* that they are actively *opposed* to Jesus and His purposes of claiming people to belong to Him to give them life to the full, now and forever?

How about those who are just *impressed* by Jesus? There are people - and there were many in this crowd - who would say, 'Wow, yeah, Jesus has done some amazing things, hasn't He? Quite a guy, that Jesus.' But are these impressed people *with* Jesus or not? That's the bottom line!

There are people who are impressed with Jesus from a distance. They think that Jesus was a great character in history, that He demonstrated great love, taught some great morals and told some decent stories. But if that's as far as it goes, here's the problem: Jesus says they're against Him. Because they're not *with* Him. Is this you?

There are also people who are impressed with Jesus up close. They've experienced Jesus doing something in their lives which is truly remarkable and has actually set them free in some wonderful way. Maybe it's healing from illness, being set free from debt, finding peace, finding community, being rescued from something that looked certain to end awfully.

And people like this think, 'Yeah, I've got to say, there is something about this Jesus. He's clearly making a big difference in my life, or I can see how He's really changing my friend's life, and yeah, I'll admit, I'm impressed.' But if that's as far as it goes, here's the problem: Jesus says they're against Him. Because they're not *with* Him. Is this you?

If it is you, let vv.24-26 be a tale of warning. If Jesus has done something in your life to release you from evil and oppressive influences - debt, alcohol, addictions of any kind from drugs to exercise to pornography to shopping - if He has swept your house clean of something that was binding you, don't leave the house empty.

Get on with welcoming Jesus in to the house. Let Him take residence and be in charge. Because if you just settle for accepting God's grace to you halfway - letting Him set you free from your life emergency, but shutting the door on Jesus coming in to rescue and lead you - all that will happen is that something will replace the dark thing in your life that God just got rid of for you. Maybe something worse.

It's something new this time, or something old that's somehow worse than before. And this cycle will keep going until you accept not only Jesus' setting you free from the latest drama, but Jesus' Kingship over your life.

Jesus tells you your problem here. You can't just sit on the sidelines being impressed with Jesus every now and then. Because there *are* no sidelines, there *is* such a thing as evil, and He *is* calling you to know and belong to Him that you might be set free now and forever.

The final thing Jesus says to the impressed is in vv.27-28. A woman in the crowd, impressed with everything that Jesus was both doing *and* saying, calls out, 'Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you!' 'Blessed is the mum who gets a son like Jesus to be so proud of!' 'Blessed is the one who gets to say they are related by blood to Jesus!'

But Jesus says, 'No, blessing has nothing to do with that. Blessing comes from hearing what God is telling you *and* acting on it.'

What is 'blessing'? It's to receive good things from God. And how do you get it? Well, Jesus says it's nothing to do with what family you're raised in, or how much you've been around talk of Jesus through the years. Blessing from God is tied up with listening to what God says in His Son Jesus, and not just hearing it, but acting on it too.

You could say, 'Blessed is he who has grown up in a Christian family!' Or, 'blessed is she who goes to church and seems to get a lot of peace from it!' Or, 'blessed is the one who lives in a society where there's still a lot of Christian influence!' People sometimes talk about the Western Isles or Northern Ireland in those terms.

But Jesus says, 'No... how close up you are to me doesn't matter. How long you've been around people who know me doesn't matter. I want you to stop being just impressed or content with observing the kind of things I bring about, and I want you to listen to the Word of God that I'm telling you, and act on it. That's how blessing comes. That's how your life gets saved.'

Anyone can do that. Whether you've been to church all your life, or never thought seriously about Jesus before today, *you* can listen to what He has to say, and act on it. And everyone *needs* to do that. Because whoever you are, wherever you come from, however familiar you are with Jesus, only those who listen to His message and act on it get life to the full, now and forever, through Jesus alone.

Have you any experience of a life being 'swept clean' by Jesus, without then going on to welcome Him in as King? What happened next?

So, Jesus has addressed the hostile in His audience. He undid their logic, declared there are two sides, announced the winner, and called them to pick a side. He called them to listen to what He was telling them about the Kingdom of God and act on it.

And Jesus has addressed the impressed in His audience. He warned them, too, of the need to pick a side, because without a deliberate choice to be with Jesus, they're still against Him. He warned them about what happens when you accept only some cleaning out of your life by Jesus without going on to embrace Him as King. And He told them of the need to listen to what He was telling them about the Kingdom of God and act on it.

Finally, in vv.29-32, Jesus addresses the unconvinced in the still increasing crowd. And guess what? He tells them to *listen to what He is telling them about the Kingdom of God and act on it!*

People sit on the fence when it comes to Jesus. And they reckon that's an okay place to be. 'I'm not saying I don't believe in Jesus; I just haven't seen enough yet to convince me. Maybe I'll get there one day.' People make themselves comfortable on this fence. And whilst they're there, they say things like, 'God, just give me a sign. Something that would help me believe in you.'

Sometimes people are specific about the signs they're asking for: 'God, if you give me this job, I'll follow Jesus.' 'If you heal me, Jesus, I'll believe.' 'If you make this or that happen, I'm with you.' Sometimes, it's a more vague plea for something that's just going to hit you between the eyes to make you go, 'Wow! Okay, yeah, Jesus is there - right, I'll turn my life upside down to follow Him *now*.'

Well, there's at least three problems with sitting on the fence asking Jesus for a sign here in our passage. Firstly, people ask for signs when they've just had one. In v.14, we read that Jesus drove out a demon in front of this onlooking crowd. And in v.16, some of them say, 'Yeah, but if you just gave us a *sign*...'

What?!? You want a sign that Jesus is the real and powerful Son of God, having just seen *that*? But you know what? You see this throughout the

gospels. Jesus does something miraculous, and instead of following Him, people say, 'yeah, but show us something *else* miraculous...'

So miraculous signs are no guarantee of encouraging unconvinced fence-sitters to get their butt off the fence and come join the family of God through faith in Jesus. The evidence suggests, they're not the deal-clincher people imagine or pretend they are.

Is this you? Are you asking God for signs that He's there and that you should follow Jesus, when actually, if you just look back you'll see that you've already *had* signs which you've either forgotten or ignored?

The truth is, often it's not that people *can't* believe in Jesus, they just *won't*. Join Ken and co for the daytime Bible study going through John's gospel, and you'll read often of people who see Jesus performing miracles and who walk away from Him. And the reason is not intellectual. It's about their wills. They don't *want* to follow Jesus. Is *that* you, if you're honest?

The second problem is that people are asking for a miraculous sign, when Jesus is *already giving them the sign they need*. What is a 'sign'? Surely it's something that points you to something beyond itself. So the point of a miraculous sign would be... to point you to something (or *someone*) you need to get to.

But Jesus says in vv.29-32, instead of giving people a miraculous sign, they've already got another sign that they're not paying attention to, one that will point them to the something and someone they need to get to.

Jesus talks about the 'sign of Jonah.' In other gospels, He goes on to talk about being in the place of death for three days and nights, and how that's like Jonah in the belly of the fish. But not here. That's not the point here in Luke.

Jesus says that Jonah was a 'sign' to the Ninevites, and that the Son of Man (that's Jesus referring to Himself) will be a 'sign' like that to this generation. How was Jonah a 'sign' to Nineveh? You can read about it in the book of Jonah. He turned up in that notorious town of the enemies of God's people, and He didn't perform any miracles. He spoke.

He shared the message that God had given them to hear. *That* was the sign. And here's the thing - the people of Nineveh paid attention to it. They listened up. They believed what they heard. And they *acted* on it, too. They

‘repented’ - they did a 180 on the way they were living, and turned to face God instead of keep their backs to Him.

That’s what those listening to, and acting on, Jesus’ *words* will do as well. The sign that people sitting on the fence keep calling for is right here... It’s in the *words* of Jesus. Listen to them, think about them, trust in them, and act on them - and you’ll get to where that sign that you’re asking for would point, too - Jesus is God, Jesus is King, put your life in His hands.

Here’s the difference between the Ninevites and the people Jesus was talking to here - the Ninevites listened up. They were responsive to the words from God that they were hearing.

Jesus talks about the Queen of the South, too. This was someone who visited King Solomon in the days of the Kings of Israel - you can read about it in 1 Kings 10. She wasn’t just *responsive* to the words and teachings of God. She *actively sought* God’s wisdom and teaching. She recognised that Solomon had these words to share, and she spent time, money and travel to hear what she needed to hear.

Jesus says about Himself, ‘One greater than Jonah and greater than Solomon is here.’ So are *you* listening to *Him*? Are you *responsive* to the things Jesus has to say about life, death, sin, forgiveness, making Him your King instead of yourself? To what Jesus says about eternity, identity, hope and security?

More than that, are you *actively seeking* these words of life from Jesus? Because, Jesus tells this crowd, if you’ll pay attention to what He has to say to you, you won’t need miracles to get off the fence and come put your life in His hands.

The third problem with sitting on the fence and calling for a sign is this: there is no fence! That’s the point Jesus made back in v.23 - ‘He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me, scatters.’ A lot of people have become accustomed to sitting on the fence about Jesus. Taking their time. Decision pending.

But there is no fence. Are you with Jesus, or against Him? Listen to His message to you, His good news. And then... act on it. Because this is the choice between life and death. And there are only two choices. Pick a team.