

St Mary's Church, Dorchester, Sunday 14th December 2025 i.e. 3rd Sunday of Advent.

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-15 [NB: I added four verses to the appointed Gospel reading]

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last Sunday we heard about John the Baptist, working and speaking at the height of his popularity. Today's Gospel reading comes from the other end of John's ministry. He is languishing in a prison cell waiting to have his head cut off by a tyrant. All he can do is smuggle a single question out to his followers on the outside.

Jesus uses all of this as an opportunity to talk about John, and about the kingdom of heaven. The verse I want to focus on this morning comes at the end of the section we heard. Jesus says that – great though John is – the person who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than John. And then he adds,

From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force. [Matthew 11:12]

“The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.” I was intrigued and I wondered what that statement might mean.

Several ideas occurred to me. I thought Jesus might simply mean that God's people were being treated badly. There is no shortage of examples to choose from. In this context John is an obvious example, as is Elijah, who Jesus mentions shortly afterwards: both people of the kingdom famously persecuted on account of their message. I also wondered whether Jesus was making a point about good and bad approaches to the life of faith. Maybe trying to “take the kingdom by force” is a bit like taking the wide and easy road to destruction [Matthew 7:13]: it might seem like a good idea at first, but it won't get you where you want to go. You can't enter the kingdom of heaven by force: the narrow gate – the hard road of repentance and self-giving love – that's the only way to go.

Those were my thoughts, my personal speculations. And there might be something in them. But when I went looking for other commentators to back me up, there was a resounding silence. Both of my ideas framed the violence Jesus is talking about as a bad thing; it turns out that most scholars –

or at least, those whose work I have easy access to – see Jesus' statement as a positive thing. They argue that the “violent force” he's talking about is like zeal, or determination.

If those scholars are right, Jesus is making a point about grace and virtue. There are, you might say, people who naturally belong to the kingdom of heaven: the angels, perhaps; or perhaps Jesus' own people, the Jews. But the people who responded positively to John's message (and Jesus' message too) are not like the angels: they are the tax collectors and sinners [Matthew 11:19]; they are foreigners to the kingdom on account of their sins. So, for example, Saint Jerome says

great indeed is the violence when we who are born of earth seek an abode in heaven, and obtain by excellence what we have not by nature. [cit. in *Catena Aurea*, p. 311]

The point that Jerome is making is that grace disturbs the predictable order of things. Surely, flawed human beings like us have no place in heaven? Jesus seems to be saying that by grace, people like us can change: we can repent and grow in virtue as God changes something within us.

If that is what Jesus is saying here, he isn't alone. Paul says something very similar:

...I am the least of the Apostles [he says, in his first letter to the Corinthians], unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. [1 Corinthians 15:9-10]

When Jesus says that the “the violent take the kingdom by force”, it isn't actual violence he's talking about, to ourselves or to others. Rather, it's the figurative violence we choose when we deny ourselves. When we repent of all that separates us from God and our neighbour we may find ourselves in the way of unearned suffering. That's why Jesus says earlier in his ministry

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

And again:

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the

same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. [Matthew 5:6 and 5:11-12]

What difference does it make to our life of faith to think of ourselves as usurpers? What if we have no right to enter the kingdom of heaven; but we nevertheless find ourselves responding to God's grace in a way that helps us force our own way in? That's how many people, especially "born-again" Christians, describe their experience of conversion. Whether we feel that way or not, there's a truth there that applies to all of us. None of us deserve to be here; but for some reason God wants us to be here, and his grace is sufficient for us [2 Corinthians 12:9].

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All of this means that we should be cautious when it comes to judging our fellow Christians. I say this especially for my own benefit, as there's one person who is apparently a Christian who I'm rather tempted to judge at the moment. The far-right activist Tommy Robinson apparently became a Christian earlier in the year while he was in prison. He encouraged his followers to attend a carol service in London yesterday. They ended up outside Downing Street.

I've looked in vain for a full account of what actually happened last night at this carol service. The most comprehensive account I found was on the Daily Mail website – I'm really stepping outside my bubble here – and from that it sounds like Robinson genuinely wanted the event to be a nice carol service, and not a political protest. The Mail reported that many people left early because it was "boring". It quoted one attendee, a Mr Ian Gregson of Southwark, who expressed his dissatisfaction: "I thought we'd be talking about the invasion of the country, but it's all been Christianity." I have to thank Mr Gregson for what has to be the single most positive thing I've ever read about Tommy Robinson.

Let me be really clear: I have very little sympathy for Mr Robinson, or the hateful ideas he's spent his entire public life propagating. If people who are inspired by his testimony came into our churches, I would personally relish the challenge of explaining why being a Christian should make me more loving towards minorities and migrants, and not less. I think the Church of England, with several other denominations, is entirely right to have lavished publicity this weekend on a rival campaign affirming God's inclusive love: "Christ has always been in Christmas"; "Christmas is for all"; "Strangers are welcome".

But I confess I feel a new hope this morning. With apologies to Mr Gregson of Southwark, I hope that Tommy Robinson is becoming less interested in a supposed “invasion” of this country, and more interested in the invasion of a different country.

The kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and the violent take it by force.

If this is violence at all, it is of course a very different sort of violence. Our campaign is one of repentance: putting off all that separates us from God and our neighbour, whoever our neighbour is. We take up the weapons of love on behalf of the most vulnerable among us – most especially those who are different from us. It is never too late in this way to take up our cross, and to join that endless host who have set their sights on the gates of heaven. By the grace of God, we may all one day enter there.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.