

The King You Can't Control

We're taking a break from Galatians and taking another look at our series, *Upside Down World* - and how the Gospel has this power to turn the way we see life and the world on its head. And I get that from Acts 17. The apostle Paul and his team are in Thessalonica, and a mob is stirred up against them, and the ring leaders say: "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also... and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying there is another king, Jesus." (Acts 17:6-7).

Now, if back then the proclamation that there is another king, Jesus, challenged those with political power, that is still the case, whether on the right, or the left. But if back then it was Caesar who was hailed and worshipped as the one in control, the one around whom society and culture revolved, today, at least in the West, that place is taken by the self. That in some way each of us is our own Caesar - our own king or queen. That we can be what or whoever we want to be, that no one else, no other Caesar, can tell me how I should live my life, or who I am. I'm in control of me.

One of subplots in the film *Greatest Showman*, which is a great film, is of a young couple of different racial backgrounds. And one of their songs goes, '*So who can stop me if I decide that you're my destiny? It's up to you, and it's up to me; No one can say what we get to be.*'

Now, that's really a song of our time - of *expressive individualism: No one can say what we get to be* - that's up to us to decide. And as one social commentator (Trevin Wax) writes 'the first and greatest commandment of expressive individualism is 'be yourself' - unhindered by what anyone else says you are or should be. Or as Carl Trueman, professor of historical theology writes 'The most compelling illusion of our day... is that we can all be whatever we want to be.'

And the slogans of our age really tell us where we think the power over our lives lies - and it's not with Caesar, or external institutions, or God: Find yourself; Be true to yourself; You be you; follow your heart. The power, the control, lies with us. And happiness is defined as self-fulfilment. To be happy, to thrive, I, myself, me, must be in the controlling centre of life.

So naturally, if that's the way we see life, we want control over our values, and priorities, our ambitions and our identity. It's wrong, in fact, it's immoral, if these are imposed on us from outside. Because that would stop me from being me. That would be restrictive on me. The only way I can be happy - we're told - is if I am free to be and pursue me. And so the whole purpose of life becomes to find who I am, to forge my own identity, and to express that to the world, regardless of what anyone else thinks.

I read an interesting commentary this week on the recent Oscars ceremony. And the writer - who was a bit snarky - described that whilst the ceremony 'has always been fundamentally silly', this year 'it was beyond parody', with even more pontificating than normal, with one star, the writer said, ranting 'about sexism, nationalism and the evil of cows' milk.' 'It was all so tiresome' he said. But here's what caught my eye. He said that in the past film stars have been 'slightly restrained in their sanctimoniousness' because they knew people were listening. But less and less people are listening, so they 'howl into cyberspace, ever more desperate to be heard.' But why aren't people so interested in what the stars think? The writer goes on, 'Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook mean we don't have to ogle the stars anymore; we are too busy ogling ourselves.'

And so alongside expressive individualism has come self-worship. The putting yourself out there, the publicising of self, so that others can applaud and celebrate *you*. As the writer of that article said, 'Andy

Warhol once said that one day, everyone would be famous for 15 minutes, but it's more the case that everyone is now famous to at least 15 people.

And so now, we're the ones who want to define the terms of our own existence, and increasingly, freedom and liberty is defined as the extent to which we can do that. You're not truly free unless you get to define who you are. And so society has to bow to that. And it's dangerous, it's damaging if you're not allowed to be you. Such intolerance is not to be tolerated.

So, what does the gospel have to say to all this? Well, firstly we're going to look at what it says is wrong with this, because maybe surprisingly, the roots of expressive individualism are not new; and then at how the gospel gives us a much better alternative than us being in control.

The Desire for and Damage of Control.

Look at **Genesis 3:1-7**

Now, John Calvin, the great reformer, says of this event, that the fundamental temptation here is to be the one who decides for yourself what is right and wrong. That rather than God telling Adam and Eve what is good and evil, the serpent says they can decide that for themselves; that they can decide for themselves what makes for human thriving. It's the temptation, the desire, to take control.

And that is incredibly prescient for today. You see, the serpent persuades Adam and Eve that God, and a morality imposed from outside them, will restrict their happiness. Which is exactly what expressive individualism says.

But there's also a religious version of this. If secular expressive individualism wants to strip God of any control over us, religion doesn't exclude him, it makes him our enabler. We still want to be the ones who decide what is right and wrong for our lives, but in religion we want God to bring that about; to bless us, to affirm us; to serve us in our pursuit of *us* - to solve our problems whilst we retain control. And God is reduced to the party planner of our lives.

And so, while religion and irreligious secularism seem poles apart, in reality they are both after the same thing: me in control, with God either absent or employed in my service.

But what Genesis 3 and 4 show us is the bitter fruit that comes from eating the fruit of control. In verse 7 we see Adam and Eve covering themselves with fig-leaves - and this is a husband and wife - it's sign of shame and confusion and hiding from one another. A little later in the same chapter we see them hiding from God, and then blaming one another for the trouble they're in. And then in chapter 4 their son Cain kills his brother Abel. So much for the serpent's promise that if they take control of their lives, they'll really start living for the first time.

And this is the Bible telling us - you think life will be improved if you get to be the one in the driving seat - but in reality, these are empty promises: and it's saying to us, take a long slow look at what happens when everyone thinks they must be king. When they want to be the ones who decide for themselves what is right or wrong. There is shame, confusion, discord and enmity.

Now, do we see any of that in our current culture? Expressive individualism makes some bold promises, that if you find yourself and express yourself, and take control, you'll find happiness and liberty. But does it deliver?

You see, inevitably, when each of us thinks that we get to determine what is good or bad for ourselves, what is or is not moral, discord is going to grow. If there's no agreed basis for right and wrong, relationships are going to take longer to form - because you've got to find that right person who agrees to let you be you, and they're going to breakdown more easily. I mean imagine a friendship, or a family, or a marriage as being like a nation. And in this nation you've got two princes, with their armies, both claiming to be the rightful king. What happens? Civil war happens. And if we think that the only path to happiness is everyone else letting me be true to myself, we're going to be pretty difficult to live with, when everyone else thinks that's true for them too.

But this discord doesn't just show at the personal level. If everyone gets to be their own arbiter of right and wrong, political tribalism and discord grows. In the past, there was a basic agreement on the kind of moral absolutes that should govern a society, but when those are removed you have to band with others who think like you, and form tribes. But the problem with tribes is that those on the outside, who don't agree with our tribe, are seen as immoral enemies.

But apart from relational and political discord, think about the impact expressive individualism can have on altruism - the idea that self-sacrifice on the behalf of another, is a good thing. In a recent book, Stefan Paas, a Dutch theologian, makes the point that it's not just church attendance that's in decline, so are many organisations that exist by people willingly putting themselves out for others - like children's sports clubs; or scouting organisations, or charities, or political parties. It's why nations like the UK increasingly rely on nurses from overseas to staff their hospitals. Why would a vocation of sacrifice appeal to a generation raised on expressive individualism?

Or think about what happens in a society when the way we see ourselves, and others, our identity, is no longer based on being created in the image of God, but is something we create, and we get to decide what's a life worth living. At the start of life the result is abortion, and the disabled, and those with potential learning difficulties, are singled out for death. At the end of life it's euthanasia where, rather than the elderly being valued as the wisdom bearers of our societies, or the sick being sacrificially cared for, when they feel themselves a burden, death becomes an option, to unburden those who want to get on and live their lives. You see, expressive individualism tells us, that the only way to be truly human is to create your own identity. But remove the idea of everyone created in the image of God and everyone having equal and sacred value - that that's your identity, then human dignity lies fallen in the street.

Or think of the burden that expressive individualism imposes on the young. If now you have to take on the role of God, and choose who you are, and you've got to create you, and not even the fact of your physical body is sufficient evidence to guide you, no wonder more young people are in counselling than ever before.

You see, the account of the serpent making empty promises to Adam and Eve is not some kind of fairy tale. Genesis 3 is telling us, look at the fruit you eat when you think you're the one who can determine right and wrong, that you're the one who should be in control.

Ok, but what can shake us out of thinking like that? Well, there are repeated events in our lives that have the ability to wake us up to reality.

The King you can't Control

Look at our second passage from **Mark 4:35-41**.

So, the disciples are in a boat with Jesus when a storm hits them. And where is Jesus? Verse 38, 'he was in the stern, asleep on a cushion.' The only time we hear of Jesus being asleep is in the middle of a storm! But look at the disciples' response to the storm. Having stilled it, Jesus asks them, v40, "Why are you so afraid?"

Fear was their response to the storm: because they knew this storm threatened their lives; because they knew this storm was outside their control. And so if Carl Truman is right that 'The most compelling *illusion* of our day... is that we can all be whatever we want to be' then the storms of life show us it is indeed an illusion. And stuff happens that shakes our sense of control; that threatens life as we want it to be; that leaves us feeling vulnerable and at the mercy of powers outside our control. And that might be physical or mental illness; it might be a coronavirus pandemic; it might be the loss of a job; or the actions of another against you. Whatever it is, it shatters the peace of your life. And it wakes you up to the fact that on crucial, life-defining issues you have no control.

And those events can leave the irreligious person reeling because, having taken on the role of God, they discover they're not. And having built their life, their identity on stuff like physical image, or relationships, or family, or career, when those are taken from them, life crumbles. But for the religious person, storms also leave you reeling, because you think God doesn't care; that God is failing you. You have fulfilled your side of the bargain but God is not keeping his, he's not blessing you like you expected him to. Like someone under your control should.

Now, if that's how the disciples respond to the storm, look how they respond when Jesus stills it. Verses 39 and 41: 'He awoke and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm... And they were filled with great fear and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"

In the grip of the storm, they were afraid. But in the midst of the stillness, they were absolutely terrified. Why? Why were they more afraid after Jesus had stilled the storm than before? Because they have just got a glimpse of who he is.

They knew they couldn't control the storm. But he could. And that meant he was totally out of their control. They wanted Jesus to still the storm, but in some way they wanted to keep control of their lives - like we all do. Just like we want God to still the storms of our lives, but we retain control. But here was a man totally outside their control. So who is he? Who is this king we cannot control?

Well, the Bible repeatedly tells us that it's God who has power over wind and waves, over the powers of chaos and confusion. And the gospel tells us, that God has come in Christ, and you cannot control him. But he's the one who can genuinely still the storms of your life and tell you who you are. But you've got to submit to his control. You've got to humbly admit you can't control your life; you can't decide for yourself what's right and wrong, only he can.

The question is, why would you do that? Why would you yield the throne, give up control to him?

In CS Lewis' book *The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe*, Mr and Mrs Beaver tell the Pevensie children about Aslan, the true king of Narnia. And they tell them Aslan's a lion, the great Lion." "Ooh" said Susan. "I'd thought he was a man. Is he - quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion"... "Safe?" said Mr Beaver ... "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you."

The King who Gives His Life to Win You

Now, you could read about Christ stilling the storm, realise who he is, realise he's the one you cannot control, and yield to him out of fear. But even right fear is not the best motive for life.

And in writing this account, Mark is pointing us to another reason why you should acknowledge Christ as the one in ultimate control, the one with the power to define who you are and how you should live. And he does it by pointing us back to another boat caught in another storm.

The prophet Jonah was told by God to go and preach repentance to the pagan people of Nineveh. But the last thing Jonah wanted was to see pagans repent and escape judgment, and so he embarked on a boat headed for Tarshish - Spain - as far from Nineveh, and God, as he could go. But just like here, that boat was engulfed by a storm. And like the disciples, the sailors were scared for their lives. And just like Jesus, Jonah was asleep in the storm. And just like the disciples rebuked Jesus for sleeping, the sailors rebuked Jonah. And when the storm was miraculously stilled, Jonah's sailors were also greatly afraid. In fact, the words Mark uses to describe the disciples' fear after the storm he appears to have lifted exactly from the account of Jonah's sailors. The one crucial difference is that Jonah's storm was stilled, not by him rebuking it, but by him being cast into it. Jonah had to give his life to save the sailors.

So what's Mark doing in pointing all this out? He's pointing forward, to the day when Jesus, the one in total control, would also give his life to save us from the storm. Jonah was thrown into the storm for his own sins, but at the cross, Jesus was thrown into the storm of God's wrath for our sins - who, just like Jonah, have wanted to decide for ourselves what we do with our lives. And while Jonah was rescued, Jesus wasn't. The one you cannot control, gave up his life, to save yours.

Christ now sits enthroned in splendour, reigning in ultimate control. But before that he was enthroned on a cross; crowned with thorns, anointed with human spit; with the sign, King of the Jews, nailed above his head. If you only see him on the throne, you'll obey him out of fear. But see him first enthroned on the cross, your king giving up his liberty, wounded and dying for you, and you'll yield control to him out of love. See him dying for you, and you'll die to your own agenda of self-determination. Because you'll know the Son of God loves you, even when the storm is raging. And that will give you a far more secure identity and a far deeper joy than expressive individualism can ever give you.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, CS Lewis writes, 'Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay.' That's what our current culture offers us. 'But' Lewis says, 'look for Christ and you will find him, and with Him everything else thrown in.'

Dethrone your self, allow Christ to turn your world upside down, and you'll enjoy a more stable basis for lasting relationships, you'll find yourself able to give yourself in service of others and genuinely care for those who the world casts aside. And it'll give you the ability to disagree with others without hating them. Because you know your identity, your worth, your value, doesn't depend on you.

That mob at Thessalonica complained that those early Christians were proclaiming another king. That's what the gospel is - there is another king and bowing to him will make you freer and more whole than enthroning yourself.