

Matthew 11. 11-15.

Well, I do have ears and I'm listening, but I'm not sure I'm receiving loud and clear.

I've registered, certainly, in the past, that resonant saying of Jesus that the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence and the violent take it by force. Registered it and left it raising questions in me, questions which still puzzle me. Maybe you have worked the text through and past whatever puzzlement you may have once had to arrive at a secure understanding of it but I think I need to explore my abiding puzzlement in the hope that, or at least in case that, you, too, haven't entirely resolved the matter

I mean, it is odd, *prima facie* anyway, isn't it, that the kingdom of heaven should be suffering violence? The kingdom of heaven as we generally and reasonably, given the biblical record, conceive it, is a kingdom of justice and peace, unimplicated in the violence of worldly kingdoms. It's coming can perhaps be *obstructed by*, among other things, human violence, though it will arrive in God's good time. It's possible to understand its *establishment* as involving divine violence on a day of wrath: so for instance Malachi, in a verse Jesus references when he says John the Baptist is Elijah, says 'Behold I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and *terrible* day of the Lord comes.' But to say the kingdom of heaven itself suffers violence seems strange. Surely the kingdom of heaven cannot be subject to any form of, what shall we say? – counter-insurgency? There is surely no question of that kingdom literally suffering an assault by which the literally violent actually succeed in taking power over it. Unless, I suppose, Jesus is thinking of a period of time in which evil forces are granted temporary sway in the world prior to the triumph of the kingdom of heaven, rather `a la Book of Revelation. Unless he, the embodiment of the kingdom of heaven, has in mind the opposition he is experiencing and the rejection he risks and will suffer. Yet the sequence of Jesus's remarks makes this, I think, a difficult interpretation – Jesus moves on from the violence remarks to what seems like a celebration of the culmination of what was going on through the prophets and the law in John – who is Elijah, the one who is to come and after whom the day of the Lord will occur and the kingdom of heaven come in its fullness, or so Malachi suggests. Jesus doesn't seem to be thinking in terms of a *faltering* advance of the kingdom of heaven.

In this problematic interpretative situation it's no surprise to find translations and commentaries at some variance. There is a legitimate issue, for instance, as to how to translate the Greek verb given in the version we have just heard as suffer violence. Technically, the question is whether we are dealing with a middle form or a passive form. If it is passive then 'suffers violence' is the right translation, if it's middle something like the 'the kingdom of heaven has been coming violently' would be appropriate. That, actually, is the translation offered by the New Revised Standard version as a possible alternative to its 'suffers violence'. But there's still a degree of awkwardness in the idea of the kingdom of heaven's coming violently, and a greater awkwardness in the notion of the violent taking it by force. The New International Version (which perhaps should come with a health warning, by the way) looks to save the day by dropping the morally problematic violence and rendering the passage 'the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing and forceful men lay hold of it.' Of course, it's quite reasonable to suppose that Jesus might have

been saying the kingdom of heaven is forcibly advancing, because it actually is doing that as he speaks. And the New International Version gives us a sort of consonance between the forcefulness of the kingdom of heaven and the forcefulness of those who lay hold of it. The advance of the kingdom of heaven, in a reasonable understanding of this translation, is aided by the vigour of those who align themselves with it – like Jesus and John, we might feel - who lay hold of the advance of the kingdom of God that arguably has been proceeding for the whole of Israel's history, make that cause their own and drag it onwards into realisation.

Forceful advance of the kingdom and forceful men laying hold on it is an easy configuration. But not violence suffered by the kingdom of heaven and violent men taking that kingdom by force. That isn't an easy idea. It's a very striking idea though, and I'd say Jesus is using the language of violence and wants us to be struck by it, disturbed indeed. He wants our attention, our puzzlement and our pondering because the kingdom of heaven's coming really, really matters. And as we puzzle it through, I think we find that Jesus is using the disturbing idea of violence to invite us precisely... to violence.

Jesus may in part be saying 'look what's happening - even the (literally) violent are getting themselves into the kingdom of God, as John's call to repentance bites'. But perhaps, or perhaps as well, he is being less literal. Perhaps he's saying 'look, people are battering the doors down, as it were, elbowing their way past others, as it were, in the urgency of their desire to get into the kingdom.' Commentators speak of the strength of emotion, the force of commitment, the degree of exertion of those who would now take hold the kingdom and see the language of violence as validated by these things. But whether that catches the ideas of disruption and transgressiveness inherent in the concept of violence, I wonder. Perhaps Jesus is saying that the kingdom project is inherently disruptive, transgressive, violent.

The coming of the kingdom is a prospect, an event, a happening to which Jesus asks us to be committed in ways that perhaps challenge us as denizens of a polite Middle England, as good citizens, as members of an established church whose inclination is structurally not toward disruption or transgression. But, says Jesus, the kingdom of heaven has been taken over by violent people – so maybe we need to be violent people.

The ingress, the *breaking* in of the kingdom of heaven is surely about transgression and disruption and it does inflict violence on the ways of the world, demanding radical transformation of self and society. How are you, how are we, going to express the violence inevitable in the clash between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of this world? What doors are we going to batter down so that the King of Glory can come in?