

Sermon 5th. July 2020

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The first part of today's Gospel reading talks about the differences in lifestyle of John the Baptist and Jesus, and how both were criticised; John for his austerity, Jesus for being seen enjoying himself with the wrong sort of people, tax collectors and sinners. If they want to engage with the people, so the argument goes, and get their message across, then they would need to change their ways of life. Jesus is all too aware that it won't matter what methods he uses to preach the Good News, or who it is he mixes with, not everyone will listen to him, they are happy as they are. "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn."

What Jesus is getting at is that we have to change before it is too late. There is a sense of Jesus' frustration here. The passage ends with those well known comfortable words used in the Book of Common Prayer Communion service, words many of us will know by heart and use on a regular basis.

"Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you."

As Jesus says, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light." He isn't putting a heavy weight on our shoulders. He is contrasting his message with that of the Pharisees who spoke of 'the yoke of the Torah', the heavy burden of the Jewish law with all its rules and regulations. Jesus is giving us a different yoke all together, one coming from his love and mercy, a yoke easy to bear.

If what Jesus is offering us is so easy, why, then, do the people reject it? Perhaps it's because they have heard some of his more challenging words: "If anyone comes after me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.... Whoever does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple."

Taken out of context these words are enough to turn most people away from accepting what Jesus has to offer them. But, if for a moment, we try and understand why Jesus appears so harsh, then it does make much more sense. Jesus is saying that we are facing a crisis here and we need to change, radically, before it is too late. If we look at today's world, we have the Extinction Rebellion movement using similar tactics to highlight how they see what humanity has done to the planet is leading to catastrophe. Shock methods to make us listen, go get their message across. Of course it can have the opposite effect and we switch off like the children in the market place not listening to the flute player,

As Christians, we say we follow Jesus, but we are all too aware that the journey of faith isn't always straight forward, it doesn't always feel as though the yoke is easy, the burden light. All too often we struggle to live out the \gospel. Day to day issues get in the way:

'O let me hear thee speaking
In accents clear and still
Above the storms of passion
The murmurs of self - will.'

Those words from that popular hymn - O Jesus I have promised - were written by a 19th. Century clergyman for the Confirmation of some of his children, appropriate word for someone committing themselves to following Jesus.

'O let me see thy footmarks,
and in them plant mine own;
my hope to follow duly
is in thy strength alone;
O guide me, call me, draw me,
uphold me to the end,
and then in heaven receive me,
my Saviour and my Friend.'

I am reminded of the words of another of my favourite hymns, one perhaps less well known to many of you, 'From glory to glory advancing, we praise thee, O Lord.' This communion hymn speaks of our life as a journey moving ever closer to our heavenly goal.

'From strength unto strength we go forward on Sion's highway,
To appear before God in the city of infinite day.'

There are echoes here of the Christian life being similar to that of the children of Israel as they journey through the Wilderness, 40 years of travel as they move towards the Promised Land. The journey, as we know, wasn't all plain sailing, they went hungry, they were at times without water. They looked back with nostalgia to their former life in Egypt, wasn't it better that what we are facing now? Yet God sustained them with manna from heaven, water from the rock, and eventually after all the trials and tribulations they reached the place that God had promised them, a land flowing with milk and honey.

Our journey through life with Christ can, at times, be similarly challenging. Sometimes it can feel like two steps forward, one step back, we slide down the snakes and aren't climbing the ladders. And what do we have to sustain us on our journey?

For me, it is, first and foremost, the bread and wine of Communion. As the children of Israel were fed with manna for their journey, so we are fed with the body and blood of Jesus in the blessed sacrament. This time of lockdown and closure of churches has been difficult for all of us, but not being able to receive the blessed sacrament, weekly on Sunday, and for some of us during the week as well, has been a time great sadness. Our prayer is that we will soon be able to return to Church and receive Communion, knowing, of course, that it won't be and can't be as it was before Covid 19 came along and changed our world.

Today we welcome Jo, we pray for her ministry among us. Part of that ministry will be to preach, to teach, to challenge us to continue that journey of discipleship. At times she might feel like Jesus in our Gospel reading, playing the flute and getting no response. We know, all too well, that we can, at times, be somewhat lukewarm in our faith. We can struggle with it, question what we believe, our day to day life can throw up all sorts of situation that we get sidetracked. We welcome Jo today and pray that she may be encouraged in her ministry, and that we, unlike those children in the market place, will be enlivened by her sharing the Good News with us.