

Trinity 4: Sun 5 July 2020

A reflection by The Revd Margaret Whitaker

Matthew 11:16-19 (NRSV)

“But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ‘We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.’ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, ‘He has a demon’; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.

At that time Jesus said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

”A Lighter Burden!”

In the passage here from Matthew, Matthew has drawn together three separate incidents that are not entirely related.

The first section talks about the fickleness of people – in other words whatever you do you will be wrong! John came neither eating nor drinking and he was condemned as having a demon – Jesus came eating and drinking and they call him a glutton and a drunkard – in other words – you can’t win – so be who you are!

The next section in this passage refers to God's graciousness in revealing His truth – ie who Jesus was and is, - to those for whom an intelligence was not the first quality needed. You don't have to be a professor to perceive the truth about Jesus – in fact that can often get in the way. Truth is sometimes more easily perceived and recognised by those we might overlook. The most spiritually warm, vibrant and welcoming church I know is St Mary Magdalen on Silver Road in Norwich. Its congregation has a higher proportion of the poor, the disadvantaged and those with challenging health and behaviour issues of any church in which I have had the pleasure of preaching. I also did my Church Placement there when I was training, and since my home church was St Andrews Eaton, the contrast could not have been more stark. God favours the poor, said Archbishop Romero, and others in Central America.

But to round off the passage, Matthew offer comfort to us all. “Come to me all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.” ALL of YOU – not just the poor and disadvantaged, not just the rich and gifted – but ALL who are carrying heavy burdens!

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me”. Jesus said. For me this is one of the most important things that Matthew says in his Gospel. His is the only gospel that quotes these words of Jesus.

The words of today's psalm reflect this view of God – “The lord is gracious and merciful, long-suffering and of great goodness. The Lord is loving to everyone and his mercy is over all his creatures”.

Now to illustrate this - I wonder if you have ever considered what is required of two horses to enable them to walk and trot – and maybe even gallop - together in tandem. Horses, like most animals, are independent creatures, happiest doing their own thing, and need to be trained to be useful. In order that they might work in concert with each other they need to get to know their partner horse in the harness and also their human master or mistress, so that trust can build and a positive working relationship develop.

The yoke to which Jesus referred would, of course, be the yoke for oxen. Now if one of these heavy and strong creatures were to decide to do his own thing, the result would be total chaos.

To work in tandem, attuned to one another, there needs to be willingness to submit to each other, perhaps an awareness that one of them has the authority and that the one with authority is the one who takes the lead. With horses they both need to submit to the instructions of the human who knows the destination.

If the horses decide to bolt – they are all in trouble!

A short tale. During the war my mother was in the Land Army, based on a farm in Aberdeenshire. Part of her responsibility, after milking the cows at some unearthly hour in the morning she then took the horse-drawn milk cart on its round. One bright morning something spooked the horse while my mother was depositing milk on a doorstep. Off the horse bolted, down the street with my mother in hot pursuit, yelling at the top of her voice. She caught up with said creature and grabbing its bridle she shook it hard saying in tandem with each shake “Don’t – You – Ever – Do – That – Again!” I don’t believe the horse ever did!

But this isn’t about horses or oxen. Jesus is talking about people. Us. He is talking about our being yoked together with him. “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. My yoke is easy, and my burden is light,” Jesus said. When we work in tandem with Jesus then we are not stressed or wrung out. We walk – or occasionally run – calmly and without pressure. Is that your experience of life? No, mine neither – most of the time. Even in retirement I find that the tasks often outweigh the available energy.

But this is how Jesus asks us to be – yoked to him and walking together with him in clarity and peace. The trouble is we often want to run ahead, somewhat like children who are keen to see what is round the next corner. The other end of the scale is that we lag behind, unsure whether we can tackle what looks like an insurmountable obstacle in our path. But neither of these options is what is being asked of us.

“Learn from me”, Jesus said, “for I am gentle and humble of heart and you will find rest for your souls”. So often we work on the basis that we know best – that we know what we need, and we can source it for ourselves. But Jesus is the one who knows the destination – we might find ourselves round the wrong corner if we insist on our own way – or if we lag behind we may miss the blessing that God has in store for us.

So how do we learn to walk in tandem with Jesus?

Well it is largely a matter of developing “eyes that see and ears that hear” as Jesus said elsewhere. It is a matter of learning that we do not have all the answers and that sometimes someone more experienced may be needed to help us see differently – or maybe just someone who isn’t us, who can look from the outside. That is why priests are strongly recommended to have a Spiritual Director and many others choose to have one – some people call it an AnamChara – a soul friend. Someone who can help us hear from God more clearly and distinctly.

That requires humility and a willingness to learn. We are never too old to learn – never too old to know that sometimes we might be wrong and need to see things from a different angle.

If Jesus is humble enough to walk the way of the cross, if he is willing to submit to the authority of His Father – surely, we should be able to do the same!

Amen