

Sermon by Reverend Rosemary Wright - 9 Jul 2017

A Gentle Yoke

Matthew 11:16 – 19, 25 – 30

How often is it that I open my Bible and there, at the verse I am looking for, find something that is particularly relevant to me at that moment, or just fits into my life experience? Not very often, yet the opening verses of today's Gospel Reading took me back immediately to the days when my children were growing up – and to behaviour that I see reflected in my grandchildren of today.

“To what will I compare this generation? It is like children in the marketplace, calling to their companions, and saying, ‘We piped to you and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn.....’ “(11:16) Isn't it the way of children to want to do the opposite of what is asked of them? A generation ago children didn't want to come in from exploring the great outdoors to do their homework, but these days children don't want to come off their modern devices to do their homework. How often do we say things aren't what they used to be? Strange how we tend as adults to think of the first as OK, but the second as not OK. But were things better when our children were young than they are for today's youth? Certainly they are very different, but better?

Jesus was speaking of the way the Jews had received the message brought by John the Baptist about the coming of the Messiah, and how they compared this with the coming of Jesus, whom they found difficult to believe to be the Messiah. They saw John as a madman, who neither ate nor drank as they did, and Jesus as a glutton, who ate and drank, and a friend of tax-collectors and sinners.

Jesus rebuked the Jews for making judgement about their relative life-styles and how they lived, rather than about the message they brought.

Others had claimed to be the long awaited Messiah, what made this man Jesus so different?

William Barclay puts it this way – ‘ The Jews might criticize John for his lonely isolation, but John had moved men’s hearts to God as they had not been moved for centuries; they might criticize Jesus for mixing too much with ordinary people, but in him people were finding a new life, a new value system, and a new power to live as they ought, and with a greater access to God.’

I guess the learning we can take from Jesus’ words to the Jews, is that we should not judge others by our own opinions and preferences and prejudices, but rather by what they do to bring others closer to God, even if their method is different from the one we might use. Jesus described this as ‘wisdom is shown to be right by her deeds.’ (11;19) It may be that we need to be mindful of this in a few months’ time, as we become familiar with a new Vicar. ‘Wisdom is shown to be right by her deeds.’ (And incidentally, wisdom is traditionally seen as feminine, rather than suggesting that we might have a female Vicar, which of course, we might!)

The reference to tax-collectors was possibly because Matthew, the probable source for this Gospel was himself a tax-collector. We know very little about Matthew as a man, but we do know that he was a Jew and one of Jesus’ twelve disciples. That he was a tax-collector, would have meant that he was an educated man, and one acquainted with facts and figures, and well able to write. And it would have been with this background that he had the skill to write so prolifically about the sayings of Jesus. He would also probably have been an unpopular man with his own people, as he would have worked against the Jews for the Roman occupying conquerors.

Matthew wrote particularly to the Jews. He incorporated much material that was important to the Jews, like the family tree that makes up a large part of the first chapter of his Gospel. And he was anxious to show that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament : the main events of Jesus’ life had all been foretold by the earlier prophets. For Matthew, this proved beyond any doubt that Jesus was the true Messiah.

For Matthew, the Law of Moses was important, saying that Jesus came to fulfil the Law rather than to undermine it, and should be seen as the man born to be King.

And then, (11: 25), Jesus moves to a more personal note. How the Rabbis rejected him, while the ordinary people have accepted him as the Messiah. He was not speaking out of anger, or of despair, but out of a sadness – a sadness that the Father and the Son are the only ones who know for sure, and that only he, Jesus, can fully reveal God to humankind.

And Jesus continues by speaking particularly to those who were spiritually wearied by their search for God.

‘Come to me , all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke from me, 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.’

The metaphor of the yoke is one that Jesus uses to help people to understand how they can come closer to God, and how they can recognize God.

I have always thought of a yoke worn by oxen as they plough the fields as being an extra burden for the beast. In pictures that we see, the yoke looks cumbersome and heavy. For the Jews, their faith was burdensome – full of rules and regulations and various disciplines, so perhaps as a metaphor, it was appropriate for the Jews – one that they could relate to easily.

But it could also be that a yoke was an article of personal concern and interest for Jesus. His father was a carpenter, and in all probability Jesus also learned the trade from his father. One of the things they would have made for the farming community was a yoke for their oxen. It was not just a question of ‘one size fits all’, each yoke was made to measure a particular beast, so that it was comfortable to wear, and did not cause blisters and sores to the wearer.

So the metaphor that Jesus uses implies that while people may work at their religion, if they wear Jesus as a personal yoke, they would find rest for their souls: for Jesus' yoke is easy and the burden is light.

I would like to ask you now each to think of the various ways you seek to become closer to God, whether as Father, as Son, or as Holy Spirit.

Do you seek God in the Bible, do you seek God through prayer; do you talk, or do you listen? Do you look for God in other people? Do you look for God in the beauty of nature or music? Or a mixture of all or some of these?

Do you find it easy, or difficult to see God, or to recognize what is of God? Or does it vary according to what is happening in your life today?

You may find it is helpful to imagine to yourself that Jesus is placing one of his own yokes upon your shoulders. That it fits you, oh so comfortably, and you are aware of the gentleness and comfort of that yoke, and that it brings rest to your soul.

We can be sure that the burdens in life are no more than we can bear, and that Jesus is always there to make the burden fit the task.

Amen.