

Sermon on Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30; Zechariah 9.9-12

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PRAYER.

I wonder if you noticed that the opening lines of our gospel reading give us a glimpse at Jesus's sense of humour. It's a piece of social satire as you might watch it on "Have I Got News For You", or read it in *Private Eye* or the *Spectator*. Jesus seems to poke fun at "this generation" — the blob of contemporaries quick to judge and slow to think, full of opinions but "don't confuse me with the facts". They are like children sitting in the market square, complaining and holding forth about what they think, but upset if you don't dance to their tune or lament with them at how terrible things are. An opinion about everything and everyone, a solution for nothing. Sometimes it's about politics. Labour leaders are always looking for more things to tax so they can lavish benefits on undeserving layabouts; don't you know that? Reform would just favour racists and private money grabbers and leave the poorest high and dry; don't you know that?

Or it could be about football managers: everybody knows Southgate was far too cautious and predictable in his teams and tactics for England; everybody knows Tuchel is too erratic in his team selections and too direct in his inconsistent tactical choices. Some of you may be staying up late tonight to discover if that's true, but the armchair pundits are in no doubt!

Notice the kids are opining in the market square, the *agora* or Forum. This was very much the media and social media sphere of the ancient world. Never a shortage of opinion there either, although quite often a shortage of facts!

In our gospel passage it's just like that with Jesus and John the Baptist. One was not good enough because he identified too much with the poor, the other because he hobnobbed with the rich. John was a crazy dieting nutcase living rough in the desert: so he must have a demon. Jesus went to lots of dinner parties eating and drinking with dubious money grabbing and immoral types. "This generation" called him a glutton and a drunkard, a bit of a gourmet and a boozier – and certainly a friend of the wrong sorts of people. Here too opinion goes before fact.

You get the impression that even if John's austerity had been less dramatic and Jesus had kept politer company, there would still have been something wrong. The reality is that both John and Jesus were surprising and unconventional. But both were men of deep integrity, and both sought to save their people from their troubles. The complaint is not really about their diet. It's that something might happen, or somebody might turn up, that disrupts our settled picture of how we like to arrange the personal furniture of our opinions and prejudices.

Centuries before Jesus, Zechariah in our Old Testament reading has an announcement for the people of Jerusalem that begins at full volume: Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you! And then he describes the king. He is triumphant and victorious. But the way he arrives is not in a war-chariot or on his newly decked out Air Force One; he isn't a mounted general leading a division of cavalry, really not what any self-respecting king might want you to expect. He comes on a donkey. He comes humble – a word that came to be translated as “meek” or “gentle”.

And it's clear how this is relevant to our gospel passage: in Matthew 11.29, Jesus says “I am gentle and humble in heart” – he uses the same word, strikes the same note. Here is the messianic king whom Zechariah announced: not what anybody expected. Zechariah's king is no wimp, and he is definitely powerful: he commands peace and he sets prisoners free. But he comes on a donkey, without power stunts or showmanship. Meekness is not weakness; it is strength without intimidation.

That's the nature of this king and of his kingdom: it is revealed not to the experts and special advisers, not to those in power – but to those without qualifications, to simple people and those who are infants.

On this basis Jesus goes on to offer us his great invitation. This is among the most personal things Jesus says anywhere in the Gospels. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” Not the sort of message you hear from our politicians or any of their rivals! Notice it's not “join my movement” or “sign up to my plan for growth” or “fly the flag of my programme” even though, of course, his movement and programme do go on to remake the world. First and last it's much more personal: Come to *Me*. To a person, not a party or a system or a flag.

“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 yoke is, by definition, a work instrument: it's a restraint that enables you to achieve things that you couldn't achieve without it. The yoke is also an image applied to the life of faith, the life of Torah, in Jewish texts. Here it suggests that Jesus himself personifies the revealed will of God.

The choice of this term is interesting because it does seem to speak of engagement and commitment, and in that sense of limitation or restraint as part of how we all live our life. The implication is that there's an obligation or a yoke to carry whatever you do; Bob Dylan captured some of this in his Christian song “You Gotta Serve Somebody” – if it's not God, it's invariably something else, which as likely as not will enslave you. There is a yoke that enslaves and a yoke that liberates.

But here the promise is that the yoke of Jesus is different. It's “rest for your souls”. “I am gentle and humble in heart” is one of those rare places in the Gospels where Jesus offers a glimpse not of his actions, or his divine identity, but of what he is like to be with. Gentle. Humble. Not exacting. Not obsessed with our failures. Just present, and helping us with a load that is lighter and gentler than anyone else would offer.

The task of the King Messiah in Zechariah is to “free your prisoners from the waterless pit” (v.11), that is to say the dry cistern — the place where there is nothing to sustain life and no way out unaided. And yet Zechariah goes on: “Return to your fortress, *you prisoners of hope.*” Prisoners of hope! The people are in a pit without water in the Mediterranean heat. But they continue in hope for their King who is coming to set them free, which makes them prisoners full of hope.

These are the sorts of people to whom Matthew 11 speaks. Jesus’s invitation “Come to me” does not go out to those who have everything figured out and under control, those whose yoke is perfectly manageable or who imagine they don’t have one. It goes out to those weary enough, and burdened enough, to welcome the invitation to receive from Jesus rest for our souls. It turns out that with Jesus as the coming king, Prisoners of Hope is a pretty good place to be. It’s certainly better than continuing as one of those opinionated armchair observers in the market square with their comprehensive list of what’s wrong with other people.

So here we are. The children in the market square are still listing their complaints. Nobody is quite good enough, nobody quite lives up to expectations, the even Jesus isn’t quite the king they wanted. But there is a wonderful surprise for those willing to receive what they did not expect or what they have long rejected as not good enough: a king on a donkey, in whose company we find transformation, a burden that is gentle, and rest for our souls.

That invitation is the heart of walking with Jesus. It goes out this morning, here in Cuddington, to all of us who are carrying whatever we are carrying. You may be exhausted or fearful; quietly consumed with grief or disappointment; sceptical, or maybe full of nerves and apprehension about what’s next. Jesus’s invitation is, “Come to Me.” Not: come when you are ready. Not: come when you have it figured out, or when the music sounds right to you. Just: come. The Lord is near, and he invites you now to find rest for your soul.

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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.” AMEN