**5th July 2020**

**Matthew 11.16-19,25-30**

We went for a walk with some good friends last weekend. One of them asked how are people now coping with the realization that all they expected to do during the lockdown hasn’t been fulfilled? You may have thought stopping work, stopping all activities and responsibilities would give me time and space to sort out the garage or the garden, do any number of DIY jobs round the house, arrange my photograph albums, write to such and such, read this or that book, tackle that job I’ve been putting off for years. Have all those expectations been fulfilled? Or are you wondering where the time has gone?

My friend ruminated that the lockdown was a bit like New Year resolutions – we all have the best intentions, but few are acted on and carried through. Then we have to cope with the let down and feelings of guilt or failure.

The gospel passage from Matthew 11 starts off by speaking of expectations.

The people of Israel have been waiting centuries for the Messiah and then two candidates seem to come along at the same time. They catch a glimpse of the promise fulfilled but something doesn’t seem right: John comes exhorting them to seek forgiveness (even though they are already the children of God) and Jesus’ tactic is to have parties with ‘sinners’. John, they think, is too austere; Jesus is too jolly. Even John’s expectations about the Messiah and the kingdom he would bring were thrown off course, and from prison he asks for clarity. Jesus can see the people’s dilemma and responds by saying, ‘I’m here: this is what I’m offering. You’ll find it’s good, though not always easy.’ Jesus is fulfilling the Scriptures, but he may have interpreted the Scriptures in his own way, not being swayed to meet expectations.

I know as a minister people have different expectations about who I should be and what I should do. Should I be more John the Baptist or more Jesus?

When you mention the word ‘Church’ people have all sorts of expectations. People may think ‘boring, untrue, irrelevant. Full of judgmental bigots and holier than thou people? Alternatively, they may have expectations about how it should be a place for harmony, inclusion and purity, piety, and action to save the world with everyone being right on in their attitudes and values.

Where do these expectations come from? What prejudices and ideas do people hold, and why do they hold them? What is presented in the media and popular culture about church, church people, God, and Jesus?

Jesus failed to meet the expectations of his day. In fact, he often turned people’s expectations upside down. He said that those who were considered wise and intelligent often failed to understand God’s revelation. Rather, it was those who were like infants who could see, and who understood what God was doing.

What do you think he meant by that? What might it mean for our church if God’s ways are hidden from the wise and revealed to the infants?

Expectations can be crushing. Our pastoral elders and the Community Listeners for GL11 had training last week from the Samaritans about helping to identify those who maybe at risk of suicide and how best to help them. One key at risk group was men who had expectations that they should be the bread winner and when they lose their job and their income, they find their status and sense of significance and dignity swept away. Combined with the expectation that they should be strong and not show weakness they are also unlikely to talk about their problems and certainly not ask for help. It is a toxic mixture that can crush many and lead to suicide. If that’s you – please talk to someone: Samaritans number is 116 123

WE can all have expectations – to be a good parent, to enjoy retirement, to live to a good age, to have a good job, live in a nice house. The reality can be more challenging and complex. Unrealistic expectations can lead to anger, resentment, bitterness, disappointment, depression. I could go on….

We can have expectations of what God should do for us and we can feel badly let down if it doesn’t work out how we wanted it.

There are just some people that you cannot please[[1]](#endnote-1). In Matthew 11.18-19 Jesus contrasts his approach with that of John: ‘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.’

Last week Bournemouth beach was filled with people seeking to enjoy the sunshine while parents are reluctant to send their children to school. Safety is contrasted with normality; economics seem to be in conflict with health. Jesus offers wisdom in verses 25-30.

He begins by thanking God and that could be the way in which we begin by reflecting on our own context and what there is to thank God for.

Jesus then recognizes our vulnerability by inviting those who are weary to come to him and promising them rest. Weariness can have a multitude of causes and can manifest itself in a variety of ways. The impact of Covid-19 and lockdown has been mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual. Its toll should be recognized and in that context Jesus’ offer taken seriously: ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.’

The last few verses use the metaphor of a yoke; this was a structure, usually made of wood, that could be worn over the neck and shoulders of animals or humans, and was used to make it easier to pull or carry heavy loads. It could be used as picture language for being oppressed (e.g. Isaiah 58.6) or linked to another (e.g. Numbers 25.3). However, some Jewish writings used it to speak of putting oneself under instruction to God’s instructions for life in the Torah (commonly translated ‘Law’) or God’s wisdom; something similar would seem to be the meaning intended here, since Jesus speaks of people learning from him.  
  
 Jesus’ suggestion that we put on his yoke is unique to Matthew. With our hindsight knowledge of what the future holds for him, we may wonder about sharing his load. But Jesus is offering to share our load, to be in the yoke of life with us. In being yoked with him we can go his way, released from conformity to laws to learn from him how to overturn expectations and know true rest. To rest in grace – grace is mercy – getting what you don’t deserve – being loved despite your failings – I don’t condemn you but go and sin no more – you tried, you failed – say sorry, learn from mistakes – pick yourself up and go again….

We can use those feelings of anxiety, frustration, failure, disappointment, anger etc as reminders to turn to God, prompting us to pray or to hand the issue over to God through Jesus, each time they arise.

In learning from Jesus, we allow a new story to be written that embraces our hopes and expectations, our desires, and aspirations – but loves us through failure and seeks always to lift the heavy loads from our backs.

Like children, we are to look at the world in our own way, freed from the burden of wisdom and intelligence, to simply come.

Come you are loved.

**Communion Prayer**

Introduce a time of meditation by inviting people to think about each part of this verse, how God’s wisdom confounds the expectations of the world. Read a line then pause. Keep a time of silence (e.g. 30 seconds) before reading the next line.

**Come to me,** - How do you imagine yourself responding to Jesus’ call?  
**all you** - no one excluded – all included  
**that are weary** - what is wearying you at the moment – making you tired.  
**and are carrying** - what are you carrying – other people? Dreams and ambitions? Responsibilities?  
**heavy burdens**, some of those things may be heavy, crushing even, too much to bear..  
**and I will give you** - ask for help - ask Jesus for help - be directed by him as to where to find help….  
**rest.** – in God’s love we can retreat, be held secure, know we are loved and accepted

Loving Lord, you invite us and welcome us to gather round your table and feast with you.

You invite us and welcome us  
whether we are singing joyfully or weeping mournfully.  
To you we bring ourselves, our community, and our world.

For those who rejoice and are filled with energy  
give ways to express their joy wisely and compassionately.

For those who are worried and apprehensive  
grant wisdom and peace.

For those who are eager to be out and about, to be with others, to be sociable,  
grant sensitivity and patience.

For those who are exhausted in body or in spirit,  
grant the lightness of being yoked to you bringing comfort and encouragement.

Feed us now with your very self, by your Spirit take this bread and wine and may this meal be a communion with you and all your church, past present and to come.   
**Amen.**

Eternal God,  
comfort of the afflicted and healer of the broken,  
you have fed us at the table of life and hope.  
Teach us the ways of gentleness and peace,  
that all the world may acknowledge  
the kingdom of your Son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Sending out

Grace

1. Stuart Wild <https://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2020/108-july-august-a/proper-9/postscript> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)