

# Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

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By Pádraig Ó Tuama

## Introduction

Sometimes the missing piece is what helps.

The two sections of today's gospel reading — Matthew 11, verses 16-19 and verses 21-25 — seem a strange assemblage of both critique and comfort: “don't expect your leaders to dance to your tune” and “come to me all you who labour”.

What is interesting is the section in between, verses 20-24, verses that contain a warning to cities both contemporary and ancient, a selection that castigates citizens for not listening to the voices for justice that have been calling for generations, whether they be from Chorazin or Belfast, Sodom or Georgia.

So it is in this in-between place that we find a key for understanding the two edges of our Sunday text. Jesus is escalating conflict in the name of justice, asking those who've ignored messages for generations to pay attention - finally - to that which might save them.

*Also, in this week's update, we have some news of grief from our writing team. Many of you will have seen news of Glenn Jordan's death on social media. For those who haven't, there's a note below.*

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## Text

**Matt. 11:16-19; 25-30**

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.”

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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."

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## Comment

One window through which to examine many biblical stories is "A messenger came to the city; how did the city respond to the messenger?"

In this formula — repeated in the stories of Sodom, Gomorrah, Jonah, in the cries of some prophets, in the letters to exiles in Babylon from Jeremiah, in the treatment of kidnapped persons such as Joseph and Daniel — a city is seen like a snapshot of the world: in the life of the city is the life of humanity. The city will fall or survive based on its treatment of its own citizens, rather than on its armaments. The city's purity is judged by its practicing of justice, not its proclamation of superiority.

Many of the messengers to cities came with messages of warning about how the city needed to improve its own practice of lovingkindness internally; and these messages frequently repeated the sentiment 'it has been said before...' Often the prophetic messenger considered their call to be a repetition — perhaps even a long ignored, exhausted repetition — of something that had been said by messengers in previous generations.

So taking a full excerpt from Matthew's gospel without the omission of four verses (i.e. taking Matthew 11:16-30, rather than just verses 16-19 & 25-30) this text, we hear a repeated motif from the landscape of biblical stories: Jesus, a messenger, speaks to contemporary cities — Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum — and compares them with ancient cities whose stories are defined by their stubbornness and resistance to change: Tiro, Sidon, Sodom.

What does Jesus want cities to do? We will explore that soon.

Jesus seems weary, perhaps even frustrated. John the Baptist came with a message and people complained that he was too ascetic. Jesus comes and people complain that he's a drunkard and a friend of sinners. Jesus compares cities with children: and in this instance, the comparison is not favourable. The children in this comparison want to be entertained. They want a dancing clown, not a warning sign.

And what is this sign? For Matthew, the ancient warning from Hosea 6:6 is a spine: For I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice; the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Matthew's Jesus is portrayed as the grandson of generations of mothers — Mary,

Bathsheba, Ruth, Rahab and Tamar — who have had to survive through pluck and fortitude. These women are portrayed as intelligent interpreters of the question of morality. They do not believe the spin that a city speaks about itself. They represent in their story and actions a true revelation of how a city acts.

The call in all of this is repentance — change of action.

In the midst of all the claims about Jesus as Messiah, the gospel of Matthew is repeating an old motif: let the city hear the cry for justice; let the city repent of its ways.

Jesus' words demonstrate his particular capacity to escalate conflict in his condemnations. He was not trying to present a sugar coated argument. He was confronting a city, and bringing contemporary places — his own Capernaum, for instance — into conversation with old cities whose names were bywords for corruption and the rejection of messages of hospitality, namely Sodom.

And so while Jesus speaks about his own cities, what about our own today?

Woe to you — Belfast? Galway? Glasgow? Luton? Newcastle? Minneapolis? — for you have rejected the message that has been spoken to you for generations. It's always easy to look to a city in the past and judge it by its actions and assume that were we residents of that city, we would have discerned the message of justice in the time. I think it is to such an imagination that Jesus speaks: you who think you wouldn't have made the mistakes of the past, look to the present and repent from your mistakes and injustices now.

We think of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tony McDade and Dion Johnso and see their cities through the brutal truth that such killings depict. For those of us in Europe, we see cities through the windows of the European project of supremacy exported and maintained through colonial projects, enslavement, people trafficking and all the diabolical progenies of such imaginations. Many of our cities were built on the monies from such 'trade'; many of our cities elevate statues that embody men who were the leaders of the industries of human destruction.

Jesus comes to disturb the complacent, the complicit. Do not look to the past and judge those cities for their actions while ignoring the corruption of your present city. Do not expect me to do a little dance for you, while you ignore the lives that have been ignored for generations and generations. Jesus asks his hearers to repent for their complicity in the present, even if they don't consider themselves to be powerful, or corrupt. He asks them to pay attention to their actions everyday.

This text ends with a strange volta: come to me all of you who are weary and I will give you rest.

Is this a "letting off the hook"?

I think that the "you" here is worthy of conversation. Jesus has been speaking to his listeners, asking them to consider that they could be the condemned of the future. And then he turns his attention toward those who have had comfort and ease stolen from them, those who have been driven like cattle, and he speaks to them. The corrupt are centre stage no longer; their victims are, and Jesus, in his own weariness, makes such a tender promise to others who are weary. My yoke is easy and my burden is light.

This isn't a balm for the complacent, it's a challenge to those of us who have denied that we even have yokes or burdens, never mind that we have inflicted them on other people.

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## Response

What sources of news do we consume?  
Do we read sources that comfort us? Or challenge us?

Jesus was a news-source, an irritant, comfortable with raising the conflict levels among the complacent, and he asked those who denied their actions to tell their story from a new point of view and repent accordingly.

How might reading news - or consuming any other media - from other sources inform our point of view about justice today?

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## Prayer

Jesus of Capernaum, of Nazareth, of Jerusalem...

You loved cities - you knew their tables, taverns and tales -  
but you did not let your love of cities  
tame your stories about the wrongs they do.

Change our cities, Jesus,  
and change all who hold power in our cities,  
especially those of us who hold power in one hand  
and denial in the other.

May we repent,  
and lift up our eyes  
to that which will save us.

Because we believe - along with you -  
that cities are places  
where God lives,  
and where God breathes,  
or might.

Amen.

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Exclusion and Prejudice