

09.07.2017
By Trevor Williams

Introduction

Jesus was creating a stir. Everybody was talking about him and arguing about whether this young rabbi was for real or not. John hears the gossip and sends his disciples to ask Jesus “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Matt. 11.3) Not that long before John was the one who baptised Jesus. But now John the Baptiser is confused – like everyone else. The great judgment that John had predicted had not materialized, and the message of Jesus is strikingly different.

Jesus sends back a message via John’s disciples, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.’ We don’t hear how John responded.

Today’s Gospel brings together the contrasting styles and tones between John and Jesus.

Text

Matthew 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.”

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.”

Comment

Dealing with Difference

Differences of belief and style of expression are a source of conflict in the Church. It's all too human to identify and approve of those who are most like ourselves. We instinctively form judgments about who belongs to 'us' and who belongs to 'them'.

The contrast between Jesus and John the Baptist couldn't be more stark. John preached about the judgment that demanded repentance and baptism. His message was addressed to a wayward people who must conform to God's will or face God's judgment. Jesus befriends the outcast and sinner, and through his loving acceptance empowers a transformation of their lives. Yet Jesus identifies with John the Baptist and seeks John out to be baptised by him. (Mat 3.13).

Jesus rounds on 'this generation' in their rejection of God's message. They had rejected both John's austere lifestyle and Jesus' socially unacceptable inclusiveness. In so doing they were rejecting God's Kingdom. Their lack of response was like that which happens when children play in the presence of disinterested adults. The children play 'weddings' ('We played the flute for you, and you did not dance') or funerals ('we wailed, and you did not mourn.') only for their party piece to be disapproved of by self-important adults. So John is rejected because of his fierceness, (he has a demon), and Jesus is rejected because of his friendship ('a friend of tax collectors and sinners').

'Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds' is a key phrase which unlocks what Jesus is driving at here: do a person's actions demonstrate the presence and power of God? This criterion provides a way of moving beyond our personal preferences and prejudices in our discernment of who is doing God's will. God uses the very different styles and emphases of John and Jesus to bring the message of the Kingdom to his people.

God's message is hidden to some but revealed to 'infants'

The respected religious leaders didn't receive Jesus' teaching. They were the wise and intelligent who shaped and directed the society of that time. It was expected that the 'educated' should debate among themselves how to interpret the Torah, but that those without formal training had nothing to contribute.

Again, Jesus presents the 'upside-down' Kingdom of God and dismisses this arrogance. He has already broken this social norm when as a young boy he debated with the religious leaders in the Temple. (Luke 2.47). Now he underlines that those who 'understand' him – and thus God – are the weak and the vulnerable.

The statement that God reveals these things to infants is just as challenging to the way we do Church! Does it mean we discard scholarship and education as having any contribution to understanding the wisdom of God? Perhaps not! But at the very least this passage is telling us that the life of faith is more than logic, information and intellectual ability.

Those who see the world differently from ourselves can teach us most. They can be children, but also those who live on the margins of our Church, or completely outside it. Among those who can teach us are poets, artists and those from other cultures and very different life experience. The implication of what Jesus is saying is that we must open our minds to those who are different and intentionally include their contribution in the decisions we make. In my experience of Church this is seldom if ever done. We have a saying, 'Don't get above yourself' – God is bigger than the Church.

Discovering Joy

How can the 'easy yoke' and the 'light burden' be experienced as contentment and rest for the weary and heavy burdened?

Jesus never promised his followers that it would be a bed of roses. Rather the reverse – they are to expect opposition and even suffering as they confront the ways of the world. There is no escaping a 'yoke' of some kind. The image of 'being yoked' recalls beasts of burden who toil under duress at the Master's command. To apply the image to a human being denotes slavery or worse.

Jesus invites the weary and heavy burdened to come to him. Here the emphasis is not so much of idleness but on the difference a loving relationship can make. The easy yoke and light burden denote consideration given to the person bearing the load. For Jesus is 'gentle and humble in heart'. No torture by an inhuman slave driver but a relationship that brings contentment and rest for the soul – the satisfaction of a work, well done.

Relationship

In serving Jesus we are also in communion with the Father, as the Son has chosen to reveal the Father to us.

We grow, change and develop in relationship. There is a beautiful intimacy between Jesus and the Father in his words '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' (v 27)

The blessing of the light yoke and the light burden is not that proclaiming the Kingdom of God will be easy – in fact as we have seen so often in Matthew, it will lead to opposition and frequently suffering – it is because Jesus has revealed the nature and character of God. As we offer our humble service we are yoked to God's work in our world and know that no matter what happens we are secure in God's grace. In Jesus, God's presence and power is revealed to us.

Response

Discernment

What can we learn from Jesus identification with someone so different as John the Baptist about our relationships with those who are very different from ourselves?

'Wisdom is vindicated by her deeds'

Are we too hasty to jump to judgment of others who are different?

Do you think it would assist our discernment in a conflict if we take note of the effects of what the other person (our enemy) does?

Failure

Does it surprise you that in this passage Jesus is portrayed as an unsuccessful preacher?

Do you find it difficult to embrace failure as part of Christian ministry?

Church Growth is often encouraged. How does that fit with what we have read in this passage and the reality of your own experience?

Do we identify God's blessing with success too often?

If not through success, what in God's estimation is a job well done?

Positions of Influence

"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;"

What influence do ‘infants’ have in your Church? Do we value them and expect to learn from their relationship with God?

Why do the wise and intelligent find it so difficult to discern the wisdom of God?
How can we remain open without being naive?

What can we do to value those who are different within our Church community?

Prayer

Prayer:

God, we are shocked at the inclusiveness of your Love.
Forgive our narrowness and prejudice.
Heal those hurts which have left a legacy of fear
And hamper our capacity to trust.
Open our hearts to your love
That accepting your kind yoke
We may find in the struggles and difficulties of life
The joy and rest which you promise.
Amen.