



Revd Ro's Reflection on Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Proper 9

Year A

Romans 7.15-25a

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

Over the past few weeks we have been looking at the ways in which Jesus has been preparing his twelve disciples for their mission. They are to be the first of the 'labourers' sent out to tell the good news to the Jewish people. Jesus makes it clear that the time is short, there are only a few years left to him. Soon he will no longer be with them; it is time now for them to have their first trial run, to go it alone. So he prepares them and he pulls no punches. It is a tough world they are going to face; persecution is just around the corner. Anyone who chooses to follow Jesus must be prepared to 'take up his cross daily.' But for those disciples and all who turn to Christ there is a great reward. They will win the gifts of God freely given in grace by the actions of Jesus Christ.

Now at the beginning of chapter 11 Jesus sends them out,

^{11.1} 'Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.'

It is now that that John the Baptist sends some of his disciples to Jesus with a question,

² 'When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³ and said to him, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

It seems a strange question to us, we have seen the baptism by John in the Jordan, read of the Spirit descending on Jesus and the voice from heaven that proclaimed,

'This is my Son, listen to him.'

John however has been thrown into prison, a political prisoner of a brutal tyrant with little chance of escape, no wonder he has doubts and needs reassurance. Jesus gives it at once.

⁴ 'Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵ 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. ⁶ And blessed is anyone who takes no offence at me.'

In other words, yes I am the one and no other, tell John that. Think back to Isaiah 61, it would have resonated with John. These are the acts Jesus is doing.

¹⁷ ... 'He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' (Luke 4)

Jesus speaks to the crowds of the greatness of John the Baptist and then he says these key words,

¹³ 'For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John came; ¹⁴ and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. ¹⁵ Let anyone with ears listen!'

They would have known the tradition that Elijah would return to herald the coming of the Messiah. Well then, says Jesus, John is the Elijah who is the harbinger of the Messiah and I am he! But he condemns them and their leaders who criticised John and Jesus himself because of their behaviour.

¹⁶ 'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,

¹⁷ "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn."

¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; ¹⁹ 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.'

People, especially the religious leaders, moaned about Jesus because his ways were different. They condemned John the Baptist because he fasted, living a Spartan life. Jesus lives life differently to him and they condemn him for that too!

'The son of Man came eating and drinking and they say, "look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!"

Selfish pride has closed their minds to the good news of freedom in God's love that Jesus brings. Actually the condemnation of the behaviour of John and Jesus' behaviour has nothing to do with it. It is simply a convenient thing which allows them to criticise. Fear and jealousy rules the hearts of these men of power, anyone who tells of the coming of the Messiah, anyone who performs great works and to whom the people turn as their Messiah is a direct threat. What has happened to John is typical of the fate that awaits any who threaten the status quo.

In the passage that is omitted from our reading Jesus goes on to condemn the towns that have rejected him.

²⁰ 'Then he began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent.'

Jesus names the towns, his anger is very specific. He is speaking of the people of the towns of Chorazin, Bethsaida, Capernaum and others. Obviously people there had criticised him and rejected his message. He is condemning their attitude and rejection of his good news. They have lost their chance of salvation.

²⁵ '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; ²⁶yes, Father, for such was your gracious will.'

Jesus has just spoken of the tax gatherers and sinners and that his association with them is condemned by the scribes, Pharisees and those with wealth and power who seek to control the people. Those who think they have got everything right in their religious life and have got everything right with God, these are the ones Jesus condemns. The so-called wise ones are those who turn their backs on him. Instead it is the 'infants' he thanks God for. Jesus talks of children, maybe literally, as children's minds are not blinded by hatred or prejudice. Or maybe it is those who have accepted his way and are following him as children of God. Certainly it is the 'pure in heart that see God.' Those whom the world condemns turn from sin and turn to Christ, they are God's children. The Pharisees and Sadducees' minds are closed to Jesus and his teaching.

²⁷ '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.

Verse 27 reminds us of the passage from John 'I am in the Father and the Father in me.' It is the clear expression by Matthew that Jesus is the Christ and that he is close to God his Father and speaks the words of God. Jesus reveals His word to people; those who accept his teaching become children of his Father. Jesus of course fell foul of the Pharisees because he did not stick to the letter of the law always but put human needs first, curing on the Sabbath and so on. However the appearance of the greatest of the Jewish figures, Moses founder of the law and Elijah, to Jesus on the Mount of the Transfiguration, shows how wrong the Pharisees were. Jesus embodies the law of God, he is the fulfilment of the law and the scriptures and he brings the salvation the law can never bring. Jesus came to destroy sin and death forever. Asked the straight question, 'What should I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus answers, 'You know the law, Love God and Love your neighbour as yourself' and later he adds the great commandment, not as 'yourself' but, 'as I have loved you.' There is a difference. Do that and everything follows from it.

²⁸ 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.

²⁹ 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. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'

Life is not easy though, being a Christian is not easy then or now, for some it is downright dangerous. Jesus knew that. He knew all about the troubles of human beings, he lived with them day to day. He was condemned by the 'wise and intelligent', the powerful and religious folk because he did care about people, all people, and especially those with troubles. He cared with the love of God. So he says, 'Come to me all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.' That for me is one of the most beautiful sentences in the gospel followed closely by, '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.' If we accept that it is tough to be a Christian what does Jesus mean by those sentences?

Jews often talked about the yoke of the law. Often that was like a yoke that imprisoned them weighed them down but not so Jesus' yoke.

I have just watched a very old travelogue filmed in about 1926. At one point it showed four oxen pulling a large hay wagon. They were yoked together and worked as a team with the man who led them. In Jesus' day oxen were beasts of burden. Oxen would wear a yoke to pull the plough. A yoke

can be ill fitting and therefore galling or it can be tailor made for the animal therefore light and comfortable - a help in their toil. It is nice to remember Jesus was a carpenter for most of his life, good to imagine him with his carpenter's hands fashioning yokes for the oxen, pleased in the knowledge that his yokes would fit perfectly and bring the animal comfort.

Oxen are not always driven from behind with a goad as the Pharisees did to the people, there is another way. In a book I read recently it tells of the old man who is the 'ox caller' and walks ahead of the oxen in the field and sings chants to them. They follow him gladly; strain to keep up with him. They refuse to move for anyone else but follow his song because they love him and his music. The work is no easier but they are comfortable bearing his yoke, they are following the one they love and recognise his love for them. He used no goad – the animals follow because of love.

This helps to make Jesus' metaphor clear.

It is the same with God, his arms are open in love but we have to choose to follow. We follow Jesus in the same way, not pretending that it is easy but following the one we love and strengthened with His great love for us, a love shown ultimately at Calvary. His was a new way, a way of caring of love, the love of the true God who knows each one of us intimately, a love that is tailor made for each one of us, just like that yoke. Wearing Jesus' yoke, as with those oxen, helps us in our toil and in our lives. We walk with the God who walks alongside and strengthens us with his love and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The reading from Paul's letter to the Romans is not an easy one, indeed it is a bit of a nightmare for any reader and its content is not easy either. When I hear this particular reading it always reminds me of Hagrid's sayings from the Harry Potter books. 'I should not have done that. I should not have said that.'

Last week's reading finished at the end of chapter 6 and so we do not hear the beginning of chapter 7. As I have said before Paul's argument and theology is carefully planned and organised to follow on from one sentence and passage to the next. The words 'therefore' and 'because' appear many times because he is carrying forward an idea and its explanation is often dependent on what has gone before. So when we simply extract a passage from its context it is not easy to get a clear view and it is often easy to misunderstand it. It is important to look at the previous passage to come to a better understanding.

¹⁵ 'I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.' It is tempting to see this passage as the outpourings of a tortured soul wrestling with his own sense of sin, or to see it as representing the sinfulness of human nature but if we look at the beginning of chapter 7 and follow the argument we can see it is much more than that. There was a tradition that the pronoun 'I' in writing was not necessarily personal. So if the 'I' represents the people of Israel, God's chosen people of whom Paul is a member, we have a logical argument that follows on from the previous passages

Paul says in chapter 7. 'Surely you know, my dear family I am after all talking to people who know the law.'

Paul is writing to newly baptised Christians, some of whom would be from Jewish backgrounds. They would have known and understood the Jewish law. He is debating the ancient problem, 'Why is it that I know the right thing to do but still do what is wrong? Is it that humans are 'born to trouble as the sparks fly upward?' Of course evil and sin are very real and within every human being has the capacity for good and evil.

In chapter 7.12 Paul says, 'So then the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good' He makes it clear in chapter 6 and going on to 7 that the law, given on Sinai and the Torah are the word of God given to his people, the law is right and good. But, it is not so simple, sin is present in the world; sin destroys people and God's world. Everything goes wrong when people ignore the good that they should have done and do the things they should not have done. That is what God's chosen people had been doing again and again throughout their history.

Not only that but the law, as it was given, had been added to and expanded over all that time. Jews were hedged in by the law. Laws developed to keep people and society on the right path had proliferated until the law became a burden, a straightjacket, a heavy yoke that galled them. They couldn't move for the law. The law told them what they had done wrong, it had become negative. In fact, the powers that be were using it as a weapon of control. Not only that, but sin was always there to tempt them. Paul is very clear about the battle that raged between goodness and evil and sin.

The other point that Paul makes very clearly in next week's reading, is that even if people kept the law they could never gain salvation through it. It could never conquer sin. Paul is talking to new Christians and explaining that salvation comes only through the grace of God freely given in Jesus Christ, that Jesus and only Jesus had conquered sin once and for all both on Calvary and by the triumph of his resurrection. Only Jesus can give eternal life and all who turn to him will be saved.

'Lord of infinity, stooping so tenderly, lifts our humanity to the heights of his throne.' Graham Kendrick

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