

Trinity 4

9.30am, Holy Communion, St David's, Exeter

Readings: Zechariah 9:9-12; Romans 7:15-25a; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

When was the last time you saw children playing in the street...? One of our regular walks from home takes us through a nice neighbourhood with a grassy open space where there are many signs warning: **No Ball Games!** I guess that means no more putting your jumpers down as goal-posts! Jesus would struggle to inculturate his illustration today: "it's like children, using social media..." No, doesn't quite work. "It's like children playing on their Xboxes..." OK, I give up trying for a modern equivalent!

Jesus uses the *then* familiar image of kids playing to offer a comment on the people of his day: '*...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."*

Nah, na na na na! What is Jesus telling us by way of his reference to the kids in the market place?

The two parts of the (fictitious) kids' shouts are metaphors for the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus himself. John came fasting, and calling others to repentance over Israel's sin (the wailing and mourning) and Jesus came celebrating the kingdom like a wedding feast (the flute and the dancing) – and **both were to some**

extent rejected. John had led a life of self-denial and ordinary people had found it too hard to take.

And now here was Jesus himself, celebrating the kingdom with all and sundry, showing up at parties which spoke of God's lavish love and forgiveness: 'We played wedding music for you' *but you did not dance!* – people accused him of being a rebel, a son who wouldn't behave – a false prophet!¹ *“Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!”*

And, by the way, if you trace *those* words in the Old Testament, you'll find yourself in Deuteronomy:

18 If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother... 19 then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. 20 They shall say to the elders of his town, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.' **21 Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death.** *So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid.*²

From kids playing in the market place to elders sitting in judgement at the gate; Jesus seems to be saying that it's not just a case of people not responding to him and cousin John — rather they are both rejected in the strongest possible

¹ Tom Wright, *Matthew for Everyone*, vol. 1, SPCK, 2002; p133

² Deuteronomy 21:18-21

terms.

The message, then and now, is that people don't like the challenge, either of someone who points them to a completely different way of life entirely; or of someone who shows God's love breaking into the world in a new way.

Jesus was offering a last chance to embrace a different kingdom vision. This was what he proclaimed and explored in his preaching and teaching in towns and villages all over Galilee; this is what he was living out on the street, and in houses filled with laughter and friendship. He was demonstrating the sheer power of this Godly kingdom – and many did not want it. 'He's a guzzler and a boozier' they preferred to say. Anything to avoid the issue and the call to commitment that Jesus was sounding day by day. And it's no different today! People still come up with all sorts of excuses to avoid that life-changing encounter with the reality of Jesus and the kingdom of God.

Our Lectionary kindly omits the verses that outline the negative consequences of us turning away from Jesus (vv 20-24: *Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida!*) – though I am by no means convinced that does us any favours in the long run...

Instead we are taken to what we have for centuries described as “The **Comfortable Words** of Jesus” – *‘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.'

Maybe we should headline these words "**Jesus' Invitation**" rather than Comfortable Words; because, at the end of the day, it's not really about our comfort, but Jesus' gracious invitation for us to let him help us with the burdens of life and even for him to help us through the difficulties of following him!

If, at the beginning of the passage, the people are like children whining in the street, now Jesus makes clear we can only truly grasp the kingdom and make it our experience if we approach it with all the innocence of a child. Oh how we try to 'get our heads' around Jesus' promises! But the trick is to let ourselves be embraced by the truth, rather than striving to grasp it for ourselves.

Jesus had come to know Father God the way a son does: not by studying books about him, but by living in his presence, listening for his voice, and learning from him as an apprentice from his master – by watching and imitating.³

And Jesus was learning that the so-called wise and learned were getting nowhere, and that the little people,

³Wright, op cit. p136

the poor, the sinners, the tax-collectors... ordinary folk like you and me – were discovering more of God, simply by following Jesus, than the learned specialists who declared that what Jesus was doing didn't fit with the complicated theories!⁴

Come to me... and I will give you rest. The Pharisees spoke of people being called to carry the yoke of the Torah – the heavy burden of the Jewish Law with all its commandments. It has to be said that Jesus was critical of the Pharisees who seemed content to add to that burden rather than lighten it. Be that as it may, Jesus offered a different yoke, which, being of his mercy and love, is altogether easier to bear.

I am gentle and humble in heart says Jesus. What does he mean? Well, I don't think that he's a model Christian-Buddhist, though there are people who only see Jesus in that sort of light! Tom Wright suggests that it means Jesus is not going to stand over us like a policeman or angry school teacher.⁵ The yoke of which Jesus speaks is the **yoke of love not of duty**.⁶

It may well be that there are some here this morning who have a Jewish heritage. However, as Christians, there

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *op cit.* p137

⁶ Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew*, IVP-BST, 2000, p143

is no call on our lives to bear the burden of the Law. But we do carry all sorts of burdens – of guilt, of our own and other people's expectations, of desire, of duty, of so many worries... I see in these verses, a gracious and wonderful invitation from Jesus to lay those burdens down at his feet. At very least for him to help us bear them, at best for him to take that weight off our shoulders.

I'm so pleased that we have the image of yoked oxen on the weekly pew sheet. (Complete with a helpful arrow pointing to the yoke itself!) Take a look at that; in some mysterious way, as we follow Jesus so he is also alongside; we are yoked with him that he may help bear the burdens life brings us.

You remember the kids TV programme 'Crackerjack!?' (If you truly remembered it you would have given a loud **Hurray!** when I mentioned the word!!) For nearly 30 years, from 1955 to 1984 a whole generation of kids watched as children were overloaded with baggage until they dropped something. The winners gained the famous Crackerjack! pencil. Don't be overloaded – let Jesus take the away the burden – the reward is so much better than a pencil!