

Sunday Sermon

Revd Canon Charles Jenkin – 5th July 2020 – 4th Sunday after Trinity

Zechariah 9.9-12; Romans 7.15-25a; Matthew 11.16-19,25-30

Today's readings are about a vital aspect of Christian faith, one which is a principal distinguishing feature of Christianity compared with most other religions and philosophies. It was revolutionary at the time of Jesus, and it is remarkable still today.

All faiths address the distressing reality of human nature, which St Paul wails about in our first reading this morning. I don't do what I want to do, and I do what I do not want to do. Sounds like trying to keep up a diet, doesn't it! Or more seriously like trying to give up a drug habit, or change some sort of destructive or abusive behaviour. I don't do what I want to do, and I do what I do not want to do. Most people, if they are reasonably self-aware and honest with themselves, will recognise this as an all-too-apt description of the human condition. At its worst it destroys lives and communities.

The standard response to this in every human community is to seek to apply such discipline, convention, punishment and exclusion, so that good behaviour is encouraged and destructive behaviour is deterred. Some religions tend to provide a way in which the past can be put to rest and people be forgiven and everyone can move on. Others just want people to go away following serious mistakes, which ultimately leads to the death penalty. However often, even if there is an elaborate system of forgiveness, people can still be left with a desperate sense of their unworthiness, and a pathological need still to prove themselves as good enough, or to make up for past wrongs.

Christianity however takes a more radical approach. Christianity says, yes you are indeed unworthy, and however much you try to do something about that yourself, you will probably fail. Yet God still deeply loves you despite your flawed human nature and all your mistakes and failures. And you know what? If you are truly sorry he is not going to count it against you, ever. If you are sincerely regretful, you are completely forgiven and accepted. Moreover, he himself in Jesus Christ on the Cross, has himself paid any penalty you think, or anyone else thinks, you might deserve. It's pretty radical stuff.

And so St Paul ends up crying exultantly, Thanks be to God, who has rescued me from myself! This is, profoundly, a deeply authentic Christian perspective. Who will rescue me from myself? And God says, My child, I already have. If only it wasn't so difficult to believe it, I mean really believe! So deep is the human conviction that we must ourselves make ourselves acceptable, so deep does the guilt go, that it can take a lifetime to learn truly to believe that we have indeed been saved and rescued by God himself.

Of course, human society must still be regulated. Wrong doings have consequences. There are earthly penalties to face up to, reparations to be made, and anyone who truly repents will not chafe against this. But spiritually in the Christian faith, the rescue is already achieved at the moment of real regret. And this spiritual perspective also has earthly consequences.

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If God never gives up on someone who repents, neither should anyone else. The possibility of reform is always there.

Of course there is still the whole area of people not recognising that they need to repent in the first place, but that is a different matter. But also, the offer in the end of unconditional forgiveness, is an important way in which people are encouraged to face up to their sin, and seek to change their ways. It means there is always a way back. This has major cultural consequences in how really people and communities can learn from mistakes rather than exacting revenge and retribution.

The current Coronavirus crisis is a very good case in point. Are people going to be able to be open about all the mistakes, so that everyone can learn and do better next time, or are we going to be so angry that no one will dare own up to anything? There is something profoundly Christian about a perspective that says that learning and growing and repenting, is more important than shame or revenge or punishment. The key is the possibility of forgiveness, which in Jesus is always there.

And so, turning to our Gospel reading for today, Jesus says, *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”* Jesus is not promising that no one really has to work hard or cope with difficult lives. Sorry about that! Rather he is addressing exactly the thing that St Paul moans about and then rejoices about. The “heavy burdens” are those all too human burdens of simply not feeling good enough, and feeling guilty. Jesus gives people true rest from all that.

And so he goes on to say, *“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.”* Learn from me, he says, and find rest for your souls. Christians do not need to rely on onerous religious customs or elaborate rituals to learn to feel good about themselves. All we need to do is learn just how much God loves us and forgives us, and so learn also to forgive ourselves too.

Finally Jesus says, *“For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”* Hmm! Often doesn't feel like that, does it! But that is because so often we don't really listen to Jesus, or we perceive his words through spectacles of judgement rather than spectacles of love. Actually, we are already rescued, and we just need to learn that it is so.

CJ. 05.07.20