

Currie Balerno - Sermon of online worship

5 July 2020 at 10 am

Sermon

‘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.’

I will give you rest – rest for your souls! One of the things that most of us have discovered in recent weeks, is that there is a world of difference between inactivity and rest.

Although the pandemic and subsequent lockdown have taken away a great deal of our regular activity – for many most of us it has been far from restful. Whether you are a key worker still working; whether you are anxious about the future of your job or business; whether you are trying to juggle working from home with childcare, or whether you just have the ongoing, nagging worry about vulnerable family or friends, or whether you are bemused, horrified and perplexed by some of the world news you see or read, you probably haven’t found the last hundred days restful

Before we look more closely at Jesus invitation to come to him for rest, let’s look at how it came about.

Jesus is out and about in his ministry. John the Baptist, who had been so sure of Jesus identity, at the start, is now in prison and thinking things over. He sends his disciples to ask Jesus ‘Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another.’ Jesus points them in the direction of his actions and says ‘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.’ - take that answer back to John.

As we joined the passage, in our reading today, Jesus is speaking to the crowds around him and he likens them to children who are quarrelling about what game to play – and as it is now some 15 weeks since the schools closed, I guess there are quite a few families around for whom that is a very pertinent illustration. Although in the text, Jesus is referring to the

generation of his time, I can't help wondering if it could just as easily be addressed to our own generation.

Jesus talks about people who cannot recognise the truth, even if it is right in front of them. We live in a world where some things which seem to us to be obvious and factual – true if you like – are dismissed as 'fake news' whilst lies are painted as truth. The people of Jesus time thought that John the Baptist was possessed of a demon because of his austere lifestyle and rigorous demands but thought that Jesus was a glutton and a drunkard because he was a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Neither John nor Jesus matched their expectations of what the Messiah should be – and so they could not, or maybe would not see the truth that stood before them.

I suspect that remains the case today, that for many people, Jesus does not match their expectations of what a Saviour should be. He doesn't fly in to enact heroic rescues. 'Wham and biff', so beloved of the comic book heroes, are not in his vocabulary. He hasn't woven a web of PPE around his followers protecting them from Covid 19 any more than he sent the Roman oppressors packing from Palestine 2000 years ago. Saving the world with love, forgiveness and vulnerability was not a match with people's expectations in Jesus day nor is it in our own.

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It's a huge invitation and before Jesus offers it, he reaffirms his credentials, his right to offer it. He issues the invitation and gives the grounds for believing that he can deliver what he has promised. Firstly, he draws on the Wisdom tradition which is an important aspect of his Jewish heritage. Jesus declares that wisdom is vindicated by her deeds - look around you, he says to the people. Look at all that has happened. Look at all that God has enabled me to do. Then we come to verse 25 and 26 which commentator Dale Allison describes as 'a Christological treasure'. These verses show that Jesus is the one who reveals God, that he is the source of our wisdom and understanding. What we know about God, we know through Jesus, because God and Jesus (Creator and Wisdom, or Creator and Word) are held together in unique divine relationship from before the beginnings of time.

Our understanding of faith, our understanding of Jesus can't be reduced to doctrine or facts about Jesus, rather it is centred in relationship.

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Although I have referred to these verses as an invitation, the words are phrased in the imperative – there's an urgency about them. This is not 'Come to me - if you feel like it!' or 'Take your time and think about it!' It is the far more pressing 'Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.'

Think for a moment of your burdens – pain, anger, disappointment, envy, despair, shame, fear, anxiety, frustration – and a whole lot more – pause for a moment to think of them.

Think of how you have felt during the lockdown - what would it mean to bring all of that to Jesus – what would it mean to find rest for our souls.

In some ways it's a challenge for me to accept the notion that Jesus yoke is easy and his burden light – I have over the years met an awful lot of exhausted and burned out Christians. But I wonder if some of that heaviness and weariness comes because we do things our way – rather than tending to our relationship with the one who wants to help carry our burdens. I don't for a moment think that Jesus meant that if we just believe in him everything will become easy and uncomplicated – there are too many warnings elsewhere in Jesus words about the costs of discipleship, but I think it does mean remembering that, in the nicest possible way, it is not all about us!

I've also struggled with the image of a yoke, which seems on the face of it to be an image of servitude and oppression – not quite how I picture my relationship with Jesus. But if I pay heed to Jesus words 'learn from me' – farmers used to yoke together an experienced animal with one that was just learning – a double yoke where the animals pulled together. Then as one of my colleagues, Jan Richardson says it becomes 'a yoke that we don't have to pull alone, a yoke that he wears with us? A yoke not for servitude, not for bondage, but a tool of connection, a way of being in relationship with Christ that makes our work easier, not more difficult.

When Jesus says, "learn from me," he is calling us not just to read further in the Gospel or to mull over theological ideas but to incarnate for ourselves the virtues demanded by his

speech and exhibited in his actions. One learns of Jesus by doing, by adopting his spirit and living out his imperatives. The truth of our faith is in our living. To read about feeding the hungry is one thing; to feed them is quite another.

I read in the news this week that only 6% of people in the UK want things to back as they were before the coronavirus crisis. 31% of those who took part in the poll want to see major changes in how the economy is run and a further 28% want to see moderate changes. That all comes on the back of the calls from 300 leaders to 'build back better' after the pandemic. These last few months have been challenging for those of us who are Christian. We have really had to think about what it means to be Church, we've had to do things differently, think about things differently. Ways of being Church which have gone on uninterrupted for thousands of years have been halted by a tiny virus. Yet, the Church has continued and will continue – not because it is an important human institution but because it is the body of Christ – that same Christ who often did not fulfil people's expectations but offered instead, so much more. We have a rare and precious gift in this time, to pray, to ponder, to wonder, to come to Jesus, to rest in our relationship with him, so that we don't just rush to put Church back as it was, but that we take Church forward yoked together with Christ – forward towards God's vision.

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It is my prayer for each one of us, that, however the pandemic plays out, we will each of us, take up Jesus invitation to bring him our burdens. That we will each one of us, find rest for our souls.