

Sunday 13 September 2024, Trinity 20 Choral Matins

Matthew 11

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

Are you tired today? Is something bothering you? Does the state of the world frighten or upset you? Are you ready to lay down a difficult emotional burden? Come to Jesus. [pause] I could very easily have ended my sermon just now because the invitation to bring your burden to Jesus is how this sermon will end, even preached in its long form. You see, there are some things for which the answer is always the same, whether prefaced with much speech or little. And the answer to our burdens, our tiredness, our upset or disturbed minds is quite simply Jesus. This is a sermon about Jesus because I have nothing better, nothing greater or of more lasting value to share with you.

In our second reading from Matthew's gospel we are privy to a very interesting episode in the teaching of Jesus. He is approached by some disciples of John the Baptist who ask him whether he is the messiah sent from God or whether they should look for someone else. By way of answer, Jesus offers them his works: *Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: ⁵ the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them.* Does it look like I am the messiah? Are not these things the things the scriptures say the messiah will do? Use your eyes and judge for yourselves, Jesus says. You know I am he.

And yet. With Jesus there's so often an 'and yet' — and yet you doubt me. *For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, He hath a devil. The Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, Behold a man gluttonous, and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners.* You doubt me as you doubted John. He lived austerely and you are dissatisfied. I live among abundance and you are dissatisfied. You doubt us both because — and Jesus doesn't say this but I think it's clear that he means it — you doubt because you want to. You are dissatisfied because something in you can't simply let go and admit what you see. You do not recognise our works because something, expectations perhaps, hold you back. *But wisdom is justified of her children.*

How do you see Jesus? Is he too good for you? Or is he too loose? Is his teaching too pious? Or is his forgiveness of sinners (who don't deserve it) too free? Take your pick, there's enough to be dissatisfied with to go around, should you choose to be dissatisfied. Now I don't want to presume to know the hearts of everyone in this church today. I don't want to presume to categorise your faith, or your lack of it. I don't want to push you too hard if your faith is timid and I don't want to let you off the hook if your faith is in need of challenge. And yet. And yet, Jesus presents to his hearers both challenge and solace. He knows his audience is mixed. He knows the response to his works is mixed. So we have this wonderful tension. On the one hand: *Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works, which were done in you, had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.* In other words, some of you are dissatisfied with me because you will not allow yourselves to be satisfied. And on the other hand: *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.*

What Jesus does far better than I ever could, is to say what his hearers need to hear. Some need challenge to repentance. Others need permission and encouragement to relax, lay down their burdens, and rest. I leave Jesus' challenge with those of you who need it. You know who you are. For the rest of you, let me draw you to listen carefully to Jesus' words to the weary. Because, though I do not know your hearts, I do know the world we all live in, its stresses and its pains. I know that it's easy to be tired. I know that it's hard to find rest for the mind and rest for the spirit and rest for all the emotions we bottle up and struggle with every single day.

And more than I, Jesus knows these things. I said this was a sermon about Jesus, so let me tell you about him and what he can do for you. Jesus knows your pain. He has lived that pain from childhood to agonising death. Jesus knows your fears, for the Son of Man had nowhere to lay his head, was hounded out of towns with stones because of what he said, and was accused of doing wrong because he chose to do right. Jesus knows your worries. Tempted when he was hungry, tempted to worship something other than God, tempted to doubt what he knew to be true. Jesus has carried your burdens because that cross he bore was not just wood but it was the weight of the sin of the world. And everything you've ever done or said or failed to do pierced his forehead and his hands and his feet. A sad state of affairs when, even for love, one man must die for the sins of someone else.

And yet. Because with Jesus there's always an 'and yet.' And yet, when the word who breathed the universe into being gave up his last breath, it brought into being a universe of new life for you. And I don't mean that in the abstract, 'for the amorphous mass of humanity', I mean 'for you', you the individual who hear my words in your ears as clearly now as his disciples heard him speaking all those long centuries ago, *wisdom is justified of her children*. To all who see Jesus for who he really is, he gives rest. To all who witness his works and believe that he is the messiah sent from God he gives refreshment. *Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest*. Will you do that today? If not for the first time, then for the tenth time, for the hundredth time even. Will you bring to Jesus your tiredness? Will you bring to him all that's bothering you, your fears, your worries, your feelings whatever they may be? He says, *I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls*. Why not believe him again today and lay down your burdens. He is more than strong enough to carry them for you. Look! There they are on the cross with him. My dear ones, he has carried your burdens already. And he stands ready now to give you his yoke- of faith and obedience- and it is easy, and the burden of it is light. Amen.