

Sermon for Online Service: Pott Shrigley 5th July 2020.

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Matthew 11.16-19,25-30. *Come to me: I will give you rest*

'I couldn't be a Christian – it's all doom and gloom! Do this! Don't do that! God's always watching – and nothing we do is ever good enough for him!'

That attitude to the Christian Faith, or something very like it, is so common: I hear it in the media, I hear it from close friends and family, I hear it from people I speak to in my work as a vicar. And I guess you hear it too – or, maybe, it's what you yourself also think.

On the one hand I'm genuinely mystified by how anyone can think that. The Christian Faith is, to me, so clearly a way of freedom, not fear; of forgiveness, not condemnation; of grace, not rules; of joy, not drudgery. Think of that picture of God that Jesus gives us in the Parable of the Prodigal Son; a loving father, his arms wide open to receive, without condemnation or reproach, his wayward son: even though it took years for that son to realise that there was no better place to be than with his loving father.

But on the other hand it is easy to see how people might come to have that false picture of God. Sometimes Christian folk themselves have given the impression that our Faith is indeed just a matter of 'grimly sticking to the rules', or avoiding anything which looks too much like fun. And, of course, the on-looking world is only too happy to repeat and amplify that misrepresentation.

It turns out there's nothing new in all this. You heard in our reading those well-loved words of Jesus:

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest'.

Beautiful words, aren't they? And many of us have found them to be a great encouragement, during times of struggle and difficulty. At such times these words of Jesus really do ring true: He can – He does – bring rest; peace, comfort, and the strength and re-assurance to go on.

But when Jesus originally spoke them, He was talking about a very particular sort of 'burden'; He was referring to the heavy weight of endless laws, rules and regulations which the religious leaders of the day loaded onto the people. These leaders, He said, make God out to be a kind of slave-driver, who always wants more, who loads you down with impossible demands. Jesus paints a picture of an ox, burdened by its owner with a heavy wooden yoke. When He says *Take my yoke upon you...and you will find rest for your souls, for my yoke is easy and my burden is light*, He is comparing it with the intolerably heavy 'yoke' of the religious law-makers; in Him people will find, not slavery, but freedom.

Jesus said, *If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed: and I have come that you may have life – and have it in all its fullness.*

Of course, His critics missed the point. They said that He was just encouraging people to please themselves, to ignore what God requires. As he says himself in this same passage; *The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners."*

But, far from telling people that God's ways don't matter, and that they are fine as they are, Jesus message is all about change. Repent, he says, turn away from your sinful lives, and turn back to God! He is waiting

with open arms to welcome you! There is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 who don't need to repent! Our God is like a shepherd who goes after the one sheep who has wandered away from his care! But what won't help, says Jesus, is just taking on more and more man-made rules – and sinking under their weight.

Of course, it's easy to point the finger at legalistic, religious hypocrites, loading people down with burdensome demands. But religion is not the only way such burdens can come.

Earlier on in our reading, Jesus utters some rather strange words:

'To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the market-places and calling out to others: "We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn."

What is He saying here? I believe Jesus is talking about something which is all too familiar in our own culture: peer pressure, the pressure to conform. 'When we played a merry tune – why didn't you fall in with it and dance? When we sang a sad tune – why didn't you follow our lead and mourn like the rest of us?'

Human societies have always had this pressure to conform. And, if anything, it is stronger now than ever. There is the pressure on the young to conform, in their social media profile, to a certain expected image; or the pressure which is all around us to accept and endorse society's latest values, or the latest political movement.

The freedom which Jesus brings is the freedom from fear, worry, guilt, even death – yes. But it is also the freedom to *be ourselves*; freedom from being burdened by other people's expectations, pressures, and plans. It is, in the wonderful words of St Paul, *The glorious liberty of the children of God*.