

Sermon

Sunday 5 July 2020

Lesson

St Matthew 11: 28 – 30

In the liturgy of Christian denominations across the world, the words of invitation to the sacramental table of the Lord's Supper, the 'Comfortable Words', include our text today from the Gospel of St Matthew:

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.

*King James Version*

Comfortable words, indeed, for often in life we need comfort, solace and reassurance. The world can be a harsh and unpleasant place: terrible things happen. This week many will have been moved by the tragedy of a toddler killed by a car mounting the pavement in Morningside in Edinburgh. The parents of three year old Xander Irvine said that they 'feel as if their hearts have been ripped out'.

At the time of writing, over 44,000 people have died of COVID-19 in the UK and over 524,000 people worldwide. Across the world and in our own community, funerals have been conducted at crematorium and graveside with only the smallest numbers present. Those able to attend the service have missed the comfort and support that comes from having others stand alongside them in their grief. Those unable

to attend have been denied the therapeutic comfort that comes from ritual; from solidarity, Scripture and prayer.

Behind each door in every parish, there are stories of trial, hardship, and suffering. It may be loneliness, physical or mental ill-health, bereavement, family worry, unemployment, or any one of many personal issues. Situations can come upon us very quickly or we may have been struggling with them for many months or even years. Our lives become clouded by the worries of love. Not lightly does Jesus say to us: ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’. Burdens of care and extreme tiredness of body or soul are commonplace but no easier to shoulder for that reason.

At the heart of the Christian story is the crucifixion of Jesus. Through His excruciating suffering, He prayed to God, His ‘Father’. The outward circumstances of His experience did not change: He endured trial, torture, nails and death. Jesus sought the comfort that only God can give. While hoping and praying for a different and better world, the gospel is that God can be encountered, trusted and cherished in this life. Through personal experiences that can be too hard, brutal or painful, the point of the religious life is that God, the Mystery, is present; the Eternal supports, upholds and embraces us now and for ever. Standing before the Roman Governor on the ‘Pavement’ at the front of the Praetorium, Jesus told Pilate, ‘My

kingdom is not of this world'. Our relationship with God colours our lives completely but we still have to live and work in this world.

Like the aromatic fragrance of healings oils, the spiritual solace of *knowing* Jesus, opening our hearts to Eternity's Stillness, is medicine for the soul. Jesus says to us: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest'.

The words of Jesus are drawn from the inter-testamental book of Sirach. In circulation for over a hundred years before the birth of Jesus, the *Wisdom of Sirach* was written by a Jewish scribe called Yeshua ben Sira. Yeshua is Hebrew for Jesus. Writing of God, of Wisdom (*feminine*), ben Sira said:

Listen, my child, and accept my judgement;  
do not reject my counsel.  
Put your feet into her fetters,  
and your neck into her collar.  
Bend your shoulders and carry her,  
and do not fret under her bonds.

Come to her with all your soul,  
and keep her ways with all your might.  
Search out and seek, and she will  
become known to you;  
and when you get hold of her,  
do not let her go.  
For, at last, you will find the rest she gives,  
and she will be changed into joy for you.

Such comforting sentiments are found throughout Scripture, including the Psalms. We know well the pastoral verses of Psalm 23: ‘He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside still waters’. The seventeenth Puritan writer, Thomas Watson, said:

A contented Christian carries heaven about him for,  
what is heaven, but that sweet repose and full contentment  
that the soul shall have in God?

The ‘yoke’ of which Jesus spoke is an allusion to Scripture, to the study of the Torah. Through weekly worship and personal reading, we are to absorb the essential minerals and vitamins of our sacred text. We are to learn from Jesus, *know* Him, in order to obtain shalom, our inner peace. *Knowing* means an intense, personal, intimate awareness. In the same way that loving partners or close friends grow into each other, so we are to grow continually into Jesus. St Paul repeatedly said that we are to be ‘in Christ’.

It is not possible to think of God all of the time, every moment of every day. We have things to attend to that require our concentration; we need variety for life to be truly fulfilling. However, there is a need for dedicated spiritual time. The Scottish theologian and churchman, the late Donald Baillie, wrote:

Through the noise and dust and distraction of it all  
Jesus would be living as in God’s presence, His  
spiritual life holding on its course, because in those  
quiet hours of the early morning He has turned His

soul to God upon the lone hillside.

As we come out of lockdown and return to some normality, busyness will once again become an idol. It can seem in such a world that giving time to nourish our spiritual life, in prayer, stillness and reading, is little more than idleness. It is easy to think that work and duty are worship but, in time, we become weary and secular. Baillie warned that we can and do lose the sense of divine things:

It is impossible to keep it, it is impossible to carry  
the atmosphere of God with one through the common  
days of toil and care, unless we sometimes stop to  
breathe that atmosphere in the quietness of a moment  
of devotion.

God seeks our attention: ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest’. The mystics taught that ‘the core of the soul is sensitive to nothing but the divine Being’.

In a fleeting moment of mystical wonder, in the still, darkness of night, the poet W B Yeats ‘heard’ a voice resound through his soul:

No human soul is like any other human soul, and  
therefore the love of God for any human soul is  
infinite, for no other soul can satisfy the same need  
in God.

Through all life's turns, its joy, ordinariness, boredom and distress, we can taste Eternity; God within us. Religion is what we do with our solitary moments. Jesus says, 'Come to Me'.

Amen.