READINGS & SERMON

Sunday 5th July, Trinity 5 A

INTRODUCTION

Welcome back to the Chapel! Some of us last gathered here in worship on Sunday 15th March, we were still in Lent then. Sixteen weeks later, we can gather again, each with our own experience of lockdown, in thanksgiving for having passed through at least the first stage of this pandemic. Our presence here today testifies to the fact that we in lockdown, have been, as the Prophet Zephaniah speaks in our first reading, “prisoners of hope”, called to “return to our stronghold”. The temple of the Chapel, then, is rightly the first place one should wish to rejoice and celebrate life, because it is the Lord that holds us in life and in death. Let us come to Him with our joys and sorrows, our regrets and short-comings, for His compassion is over all that he has made.

#### The liturgy of the word

First Reading:Zechariah 9.9-12 **sit**

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion!
   Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
   triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on a donkey,
   on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim
   and the warhorse from Jerusalem;
and the battle-bow shall be cut off,
   and he shall command peace to the nations;
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,
   and from the River to the ends of the earth.
As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
   I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit.
Return to your stronghold, O prisoners of hope;
   today I declare that I will restore to you double.

### THE GOSPEL: Matthew 11.16-19, 25-30

Jesus said, ‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, “We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.” For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

‘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.’

SERMON

*given by Fr Richard Fermer*

“*Come to me, all you who toil and are heavy-laden*” (Matt 11.28)

Well, we have come! And I think we all need a little refreshment, but may be we also need to acknowledge our the stresses and strains that we have passed through.

I look back over “lockdown” and I can give thanks for having the love and support of my wife, food and housing, and the continued focus of my work. Amidst the anxiety of the time, I have sought, as I am sure you have all had to, in the words of Zephaniah, “return to your stronghold”, your “inner being” and “centre” to find the strength to face the challenges, anxieties, fears and sorrows that events across the world have induced and still do. Even though I have had a relatively privileged journey through this time, I have noticed that I am much more sensitive now to any bad news than before. Last week speaking to Rosie, one member of our congregation who is not at all well herself, she told me that her husband Peter of fifty-nine years standing is dying in hospital. I really felt the weight of her burden and I carried it with me in my prayers. I also remember looking at the sanctuary that I had created at home during “Lockdown”, when ministers were requested not to pray in their churches by their bishops. It was now without the reserved sacrament and I found myself welling up with emotion. Why? I had prayed there faithfully on my knees, on my own, often broadcast to those who wished to accompany me online, in the midst of a world which had shut down, apart from intense centres of activity, such as our hospitals, which fought heroically to keep people alive, old and young.

Am I weary? Yes, I am weary. Have I toiled? Yes, I have toiled to keep this Chapel and our community as a praying body afloat. And although, it is the morning after “Super Saturday” or “independence day”, as some have called it, and there has been a sense of release and joy – how ephemeral or not we shall see - I think we all need to lay today our weariness and burdens before our Lord and seek His Divine refreshment. We need time to come to terms with what we have passed through and even allow emotions to emerge.

Yet, Jesus surprises us once more as we come for our refreshment and rejoicing. It is not as simple as collapsing into God’s arms. One finds rest, He says, by taking on His yoke. A yoke speaks of an animal harnessed to do work. Through the yoke, after all, the farmer provides discipline and direction to the animal. May be that’s not what you need now – we’ve been through enough restrictions! But Jesus also associates it with “learning”, “learn from me”. Indeed, in the Jewish tradition the “yoke” is associated with learning Divine wisdom. For example, in the Book of Sirach the sage invites potential pupils to “put your neck under the yoke, and let your souls receive instruction (…) See with your eyes that I have laboured little and found for myself much rest.” (51.26). Jesus redirects this to Himself: “learn from me” he says, become members of my school of charity, my disciples. I hope you have been learning from Him during this strange and difficult time. This is not head stuff. The fruit of learning is not proud, erudite cognitive power or status, but quite the contrary to become “meek and humble in heart”. It is a learning which is personal, by acquaintance, living alongside Jesus, being with Him, following Him. Although, we cannot share His earthly life, we can walk with Him day by day through the gift of the Spirit, in study of His Scripture, in prayer, services and Sacrament.

I was in our Parish School on Friday, meeting children from one of the Year Groups currently not at school. I asked them about their experience of “lockdown”. They had had in effect a rather extended holiday, to be continued until September. Were they happy to be free of the “yoke” of learning, I wondered? Well, no not really. They had missed school, they had missed their friends and teachers, and some of them declared that they had become bored. Learning suddenly came to be seen in a new and welcome light!

Likewise with Jesus’ “yoke” and His school of disciples. His learning turns out to be a “light burden” for His disciples, not because it evades substance or suffering, but because it is permeated by grace and gift that comes from God. By contrast, in Matthew chapter 24, Jesus describes the oppressive burden of the teaching of the Pharisees: “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them” (24.4). This is holding learning as power over others. This is not Jesus’ way: learning is to release others to become God-like, children of God. We all know that good teachers make the experience of learning light, not because it is without content, but because they have drawn us into its passion, such that the effort and concentration becomes almost unnoticeable. They do that not just by knowing their subject inside out, but by sharing their passion for it and investing their person in it. Jesus invests His life in our lives. We become quite literally His Passion, our learning, our growth, infused by His gift and grace.

All is not over. The toil, weariness and burden of our world will continue in these up-and-down days which are ahead of us. Our world needs rebuilding. Our lives need rebuilding. Our Church needs rebuilding. Where do we start? We hear the call deep with us of God: “Come to me”. Without self-pity or indulgence, we acknowledge our need for renewal, refreshment, rest. And we see the glorious paradox that this rest and refreshment, will come from learning more from Christ, the One who shows us God because He is God’s Self-gift to us. Walk with Him in these days of tribulation. Learn from Him and rebuild your inner life on His grace, the Church on His self-giving love, and the world on His justice. +