

## SEEING JESUS AS HE REALLY IS

Zechariah 9. 9-12

Romans 7. 15-25a

Matthew 11. 16-19, 25-30

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

At the beginning of the chapter from which our gospel text is taken, John the Baptist's disciples ask our Lord, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?'

John, who so clearly recognised who Jesus was when he baptised him, is now having doubts. Who can blame him? The great judgement that John had announced has not materialised; the corrupt are still in power; and John is now languishing in Herod's prison.

Christ tells John's disciples to tell John what they have heard and seen: the blind are receiving sight; the lame are walking; the lepers are cleansed; the deaf can hear; the dead are raised; and the poor are receiving good news (11. 5). Although these not the mighty acts of judgement that John envisioned, they are surely signs of God's kingdom drawing near.

After John's disciples leave, our Lord speaks to the crowds about John the Baptist with words of high praise. No one who has ever lived is greater than John the Baptist, Jesus says (11. 11). He is the fulfilment of prophecy, the Elijah sent by God to prepare the way for the Messiah (11. 12-14). John the Baptist stood on the threshold of the kingdom; yet now the kingdom is breaking in through Christ, and even the least in the kingdom of heaven is now greater than John (11. 11).

The problem with this generation, our Lord says, is that they listen neither to John nor to Jesus. John's austere lifestyle led people to accuse him of having a demon, whilst Christ's habit of eating and drinking with sinners earned him a bad reputation (11. 18-19). This generation finds reason to take offence at both John and our Lord and thus to evade the call of both. They are like children in the market-place who cannot decide whether they want to play funny games like wedding games or sad games like funeral games;<sup>1</sup> and they end up playing neither (11. 16-17).

'Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds,' Jesus says. Our Lord's own deeds, described at the beginning of chapter 11 of St Matthew's gospel, give evidence that *he* embodies and reveals the wisdom of God; that *he* is 'the one who is to come'; that *he* is the one who ushers in God's kingdom.

Our appointed lectionary reading then picks up with Christ's prayer thanking his Father because he has 'hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and revealed them to infants.' The 'wise and intelligent' may refer to any who reject our Lord and his message, but perhaps especially to the religious leaders, whom Jesus often rebukes for their self-importance and hypocrisy. The scribes and Pharisees pride themselves on being learned in the law, yet they fail to understand the basics of justice, mercy, and faith (23. 23). They repeatedly reject Christ and conspire against him; and in doing so conspire against the very purposes of God.

The 'infants', on the other hand, are the poor in spirit, the meek, the merciful, the persecuted, all whom our Lord calls blessed (5. 3-12). They are the sick and the lame, the lepers and demon-possessed, the tax collectors and sinners who come to Jesus for healing of body and spirit. It is God's gracious will to act in ways that confound human wisdom (11. 26), and so these 'infants' see what the 'wise' cannot: that Christ is sent by the Father and reveals the Father (11. 27).

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<sup>1</sup> The 'funeral games' are an indirect reference to John's ministry; and the 'wedding games' are an indirect reference to the ministry of Christ.

Our Lord's prayer then turns to an invitation: 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest' (11. 28). Who are the ones who are labouring wearily and who are heavily burdened? Again, it is the common people rather than their leaders. Later on in Matthew's gospel, Jesus chastises the scribes and Pharisees because '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' (23. 4). The heavy burden that they lay on the people is not the Law *per se*; it is rather their particular interpretation and practice of the Law.<sup>2</sup>

The religious leaders in Matthew's story are also complicit with the Roman rulers in maintaining the imperial system. The common people labour wearily under Roman occupation, and yet in it the ruling elite have secured wealth, status, and power at the expense of the lowly. Christ rejects this social order as contrary to God's will (cf. 20. 25-28).

To all those labouring under harsh religious and political systems, our Lord says, 'Come to me... and I will give you rest.' In the Scriptures, the word 'rest' can refer to many things: Sabbath rest, the rest of death, or rest from war when Israel's enemies have been subdued. Rest can also be an image of salvation, of what the world will be when it is finally ordered according to God's purposes and enjoys its full and complete Sabbath. In promising 'rest', Jesus promises life under God's reign in the new world that he is bringing into being.

All of us, at some point in our lives, have experienced deep weariness, in different ways and for different reasons. Sometimes we can point to a significant factor that has contributed to our fatigue; but often we cannot. Our weariness comes about because of life's complexities, because of our weakness and frailties, and sometimes

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<sup>2</sup> which, for instance, excludes the ritually unclean from meals (9. 10-13); places restrictions on the Sabbath that ignore human need (12. 1-14); and which is zealous about tithing mint, dill, and cumin, but neglects the 'weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith' (23. 23).

because of disappointment and heartbreak. To any of us who are ‘weary and carrying heavy burdens’ of many and various kinds; to any of us who are weary to the bone and weighed down, Christ says, ‘Come to *me*... and I will give you *rest*.’ His simple promise is offered so that we can be relieved, be refreshed, and find hope.

Our Lord goes on to issue another invitation to the weary: ‘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’ (11. 29-30). Traditionally, the yoke was a familiar symbol of burden-bearing, oppression, and subjugation. Yokes were laid on the necks and shoulders of oxen and also on prisoners of war and slaves. But ‘yoke’ was also sometimes used metaphorically in the Hebrew scriptures with positive connotations.<sup>3</sup>

What is the yoke that Jesus offers? We might infer that it is his teaching, or his way of discipleship, which is not burdensome but life-giving. He invites the weary to learn from him, for he is not a tyrant who lords it over his disciples, but one who is ‘gentle and humble in heart’. His yoke is easy (a word that is better translated as ‘good’ or ‘kind’); and his burden is light. To take Christ’s yoke upon oneself is to be yoked to the one through whom God’s kingdom of justice, mercy, and compassion is breaking into this world, and to find the rest for which our souls long.

It is not that our Lord invites us to a life of ease. Following him will be full of risks and challenges, as he has made abundantly clear. He calls us to a life of humble service, but it is a life of freedom and joy instead of a life of slavery. It is a life yoked to Jesus under God’s gracious and merciful reign; it is a life free from the burden of sin and from the need to prove oneself; it is a life free to *rest* deeply and securely in God's grace. Today, let us step into the rest that he offers us. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> As in the invitation to wisdom in Sirach 51. 26, ‘Put your neck under her yoke, and let your souls receive instruction’, and as a rabbinic metaphor for the difficult but joyous task of obedience to Torah.