

# *listen!*

a sermon preached on the  
*fifth sunday after pentecost*

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at

*st john's*

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

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The lections: Zechariah 9: 9-12; Psalm 145; Romans 7: 14-25; Matthew 11: 15-30

The last three verses of today's Gospel reading must constitute one of the most loved sayings of Jesus:

'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.'<sup>1</sup>

I remember coming across that last verse in particular – “my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” – as an earnest young teenager, at a time when I was struggling with how demanding the Christian life seemed to be. Why had I never heard that before, I wondered: Jesus' yoke is easy, his burden light. It was mind-blowing, and comforting beyond description. Likewise Jesus' claim to be “gentle and humble in heart”. It makes him so approachable, doesn't it?

Yes, but we must not be tempted into falling into the trap of simply seeing him as 'gentle Jesus, sweet and mild', as the old 18<sup>th</sup> century children's hymn puts it, one on whom we can simply dump all our problems. Or let that sweet image coerce us into a timid, goody-two-shoes version of the Christian life, where we avoid confronting evil and instead adopt a mindless anodyne spiritual outlook.

For some strange reason, the lectionary for today seems to fall into that trap. It makes Jesus' uncompromising condemnation of the hard-heartedness of three Galilean towns an optional extra. But those verses in the middle of this passage are vitally important – they offer a powerful corrective to the 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' image! Listen to them again:

'Jesus began to reproach the cities in which most of his deeds of power had been done, because they did not repent. 'Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? No, you will be brought down to Hades. For if the deeds of power done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that on the day of judgement it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom than for you.'<sup>2</sup>

Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum were towns all close to each other on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. In particular, Capernaum featured frequently in Jesus' ministry, and was the centre of his public ministry for some time. Some scholars believe he probably at some stage lived in St Peter's home there. So his condemnation of these three places was frighteningly close to home for his Galilean listeners – a bit like Jesus standing in the Camberwell Sunday market and raining down 'woes' on Camberwell, Hawthorn and Kew! This is certainly no 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild'!

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 11: 28-30

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 11: 20-24

Today's Gospel passage, in its entirety, forces us to look more closely at Jesus' gentleness and his humility. As one commentator, Melbourne scholar Brendan Byrne, says, "the severity of the 'woes' upon the unrepentant cities of Galilee comes like a shock of cold water thrown upon the narrative".<sup>3</sup> They show that Jesus' humility certainly has nothing to do with a timid acquiescence in what was happening around him, a sort of 'oh well, better not rock the boat, just keep everything nice' attitude. Nothing could be further from the truth, as those explosive condemnations show.

Byrne sees in Jesus' condemnation of these places he knew so well and where he had performed so many miracles of healing, as revealing his "anguish of love frustrated", of "effort wasted on these cities and this people closest to his heart".<sup>4</sup> He has expended such energy and prayer and love on these people, and all he has reaped himself is condemnation and rejection. He is in agony that these people to whom he has ministered so lovingly, can see him only through the prism of their own wilful presumptions. He was bringing them the Good News of the eruption of the very Kingdom of God in their midst, as he ate and drank with the poor and the marginalised, but all they could see was a "glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners".<sup>5</sup>

Some, of course, did see that the Kingdom was among them, those whom Jesus describes as "infants", or "little ones". Those who should have recognised what was happening among them – the "wise and intelligent" – have failed to do so, and caught up in their own need for power and importance, have openly rejected the kingdom. The "little ones" are those who are humble enough, and therefore open enough, to see and appreciate the radical 'new thing' that God is doing among them.

And it is these "little ones" who Jesus invites to come to him – to *him*, not to the so-called "wise and intelligent" – to find rest. For it is clear that the superior ones will want to burden the "little ones" further, not ease their burdens. The rest Jesus offers is not simply a relief from life's daily trials, or even a time of inactivity, but rather more like an eternal Sabbath rest with God, where they will experience the fullness of life in God's kingdom come among them.<sup>6</sup> It is where, in taking Jesus' "easy" yoke on them – that is, willingly drawing close to Jesus and learning humbly from him – they will find that even the very real demands of the Gospel can feel "light".

And the "little ones" who gladly lean on him, experience Jesus as "gentle and humble of heart", because they have accepted his "invitation to enter into an exchange of love", a love which is "ultimately an extension of the love of the Father".<sup>7</sup>

So Jesus' gentleness and humility is revealed here as something vastly different from timidity or capitulation to evil. As we can see from his public denunciation of those Galilean villages that had rejected him, he did not hesitate to call out pride, obstruction and wrongdoing when he saw it. There is steel in him when it is necessary to confront evil. We can see it in the prophesy of Zechariah, that we heard this morning: the king – the messiah – will cut off the chariots and warhorses and battle-bows, but not as one who lords it over others, who demands an arbitrary obedience, but rather as one humble enough to ride not on a warhorse, but on the colt of that lowly beast of burden, the donkey.<sup>8</sup> He is truly "gentle and humble in heart" for those who come to him, humbly, to learn from him.

Jesus says to us today: "Let anyone with ears listen!"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today*, St Pauls Publications, Sydney, 2004, p.93

<sup>4</sup> Byrne, p. 94

<sup>5</sup> Matthew 11:19

<sup>6</sup> Byrne, P.96

<sup>7</sup> Byrne, P.97

<sup>8</sup> Zechariah 9:9-12

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 11:15