

listen!

a sermon preached on the
the fourth sunday after pentecost

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at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by

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the lections: Genesis 24: 34-38, 42-49, 58-67; Romans 7: 14-25; Matthew 11:15-30

“Let anyone with ears listen!”

With these words, which seem either to be words of encouragement, or an exasperated desire for people to pay attention to what he was saying, Jesus continues speaking to the crowds.

In the moments before this reading begins, Jesus has been speaking about prophets, and the importance of prophets, specifically about John the Baptist. Jesus praises him as a prophet, one who foretold the coming of the Messiah.

And in his speaking about prophets, Jesus puts his finger on one of the most difficult and frustrating aspects of human nature - expectations, and more specifically, being dissatisfied with what we see and wanting more.

When Jesus speaks of the children in the marketplace, whose music was not danced to, and whose lamentations were not joined, it is like someone crying out to God "I wanted this, and I didn't get it", or "I wanted this, and you gave me that!?"

We need to remind ourselves often that God is not the Divine Wish-Granter, one who will indulge whims as a wizard might with a wave of a magic wand; to my mind, God's way of working is infinitely more mysterious, and much less interventionist.

That is not to say that it is wrong to pour out our hearts to God, rather, that it's a problem when we expect that our prayers and our desires have the power to change what will be, or to believe that if we didn't get what we want that we are not loved or that God demands us to try harder and be more devout in a show of placation and obedience - Prayer is placing the cares and desires of the world and its people, both general and specific, into the hands of God, asking for help in bearing the load of compassion with the One who is infinitely compassionate and merciful.

Now, back to prophets.

John the Baptist came as a prophet in one form, and people rejected him, their saying "He has a demon!" as an expression of their disbelief that this strange man from the wilderness might bear a message from God. And then Jesus comes, behaving differently, and his ways are rejected too, this very human man, who eats and drinks with his friends and family - thinking that surely a prophet would be more discernibly Godly, more obviously different thanks to his connection to the divine.

Yet the truth will out. Both John and Jesus will be known as prophets, bearing God's message and witnessing to God's love, and Jesus will be revealed as the Son of God.

And what does Christ mean when he thanks God that these things have been hidden from the wise and the intelligent, and been revealed to infants?

To my mind, this is a lesson that faith does not need great wisdom in order to be valid. So often we assume that the wise have a stronger or more defined faith, will know more of God, will have the answers to theological questions, or have some kind of understanding that means their faith will withstand the knocks and bumps of life.

But Christ reveals a great truth - faith and belief is not the province of the intelligentsia, the capacity to believe is within all people.

And in bringing the example of children, Jesus is giving us an important lesson about belief, and the way that God is known even by children, even by infants.

Sometimes we assume that children cannot understand or should not experience some things, and should only be exposed to them 'at the right time', that is, when they're older. But if we have this view about faith and matters of religion, this is making a mistake. It's a mistake because faith is the response of the human heart to the love of God, rather than an intellectual response to the love of God, the faith of children is as complete, as deep and as wonderful as the faith of an adult.

And then the Gospel reading ends with those words of encouragement and comfort. "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." These familiar words are warm, reiterating that notion that all are beloved of God and welcomed by Christ.

And Jesus continues, encouraging us to "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."

What struck me about that sentence were the three words "learn from me". We call Jesus 'teacher', and his ministry was one which taught not only his disciples but the masses who gathered to hear him. He taught through parable and he taught through action. He taught compassion, love, reconciliation, justice and mercy. He taught generosity and forgiveness, humility and kindness. He reached out to the ostracised, the forgotten, the shamed and humiliated. He spoke with the mad and the bad as well as the good and the powerful. He neglected no one. He turned no one away. If people didn't listen to him, that was their decision.

And this is what he teaches us to do – to carry on his work. We are, with the call to take the yoke, to follow Christ's way, to live out our lives according to his teachings of love and compassion, and we are called to learn, to be changed, by the experience. And in this way, we are all invited by Christ to know and love God, who has been revealed to us by Christ, in Christ, incarnate in the world.

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