

Sermon for Sunday 5 July 2020: Trinity 4

If you're brave enough to venture into the world of social media, you'll know that discussions online often degenerate into people taking extreme positions and no longer listening to each other. For those caught in the middle, they just can't win.

Take the BBC

People on the right of politics think the BBC is some kind of politicised awkward squad working against the prime minister and are demanding its funding to be stopped. People on the left think it gives the government an easy ride and is staffed with Conservatives – especially picking on Laura Kuensberg for having social contact which is alleged to affect her impartiality. The BBC can't win

Perhaps you have felt similarly with things much closer to home. There are times in every family when whatever you do, you can't win.

Take comfort from Jesus in today's Gospel reading. He points out to his critics that they regarded John as demon possessed for his teetotal and austere lifestyle, and they call Jesus a glutton and a drunkard for sharing and receiving people's hospitality. He can't win. And he refers to a game the children play, calling to each other "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." Some people think he may even have been referring to a children's song or a game, referring to funerals and weddings.

The truth is, of course, that the two cousins - Jesus and John - were both doing God's will in very different ways. John gave a robust challenge to everyone as an outsider, as a person who lived in the wilds and on the edges. Jesus worked on the inside, getting to know people, spending time with them, and also challenging those with responsibility and power. But you need to be able to discern and understand that.

In the reading we heard, Jesus moves to saying something really important, celebrating that people have responded to him. The ability to see God at work, and to discern his activity hasn't depended on intellectual ability or education. I don't read this as having a go at intelligent and educated people as such – it's more about pride in that ability. We need an innocent child-like ability to see where God is at work, whether we are academics or not; Jesus came across precious few amongst the educated religious and political establishment. However, Jesus is saying that being able to see God, and to discern his hand, his works and his message doesn't require any special ability or education – it's an incredibly inclusive gift. Little children, or those with the same openness can see who he is and what he is doing, the kingdom he is preaching, and the hear the good news he is proclaiming.

Then in verse 27 he makes a statement that sounds more like something from John's gospel – that he and his Father do indeed have a unique relationship, and that those who are open can see that is true.

Well that's all very nice, but what difference does it make to us? Jesus explains that in verses 28-30. The weary are to come to him and find rest. That's a welcome message for all of us who are weary with lockdown, social distancing and endlessly washing our hands. However, whilst I think it is entirely legitimate to give those burdens to Jesus in trust that he can give us peace, I think he has a particular weariness in mind – the burdens and demands of the religious system.

It's interesting that Jesus uses the image of a yoke to illustrate his point. William Barclay writes about this text, suggesting that it's quite possible that as a carpenter Jesus may well have made actual yokes himself. We can't know, although it's a plausible idea. But he does promise that his yoke is easy and the burden is light.

Notice that he doesn't remove the yoke altogether. The freedom of those who follow Jesus isn't without its obligations and responsibilities – there is still a yoke. However, this yoke is a good fit, it's made to measure, the burden is light. Why?

Obligation, duty and legalism are not the characteristics of living in the Kingdom that Jesus is preaching. The law should have been a means to reveal how to live in a free relationship, but it has become onerous and administered by people Jesus denounces elsewhere as hypocrites. St Paul uses language of "law" and "grace" when he explains this same dilemma, and we thought about his struggles a week or two back. But freedom from law isn't a license to do what you like, it's a liberation to live a life shaped by grace, and characterised by love.

So paradoxically, the promise that Jesus makes is that taking his yoke, which sounds at first like hard work, is actually the way to rest for our souls. All too often we strive after the wrong things – we take on the yokes of guilt or the pursuit of selfishness, or the kind of ambition that just wants more. Sometimes we take on yokes we don't deserve – of false guilt, or feeling responsible for things or people which we shouldn't be bearing along – if at all.

And Jesus says take my yoke – and then all of those other burdens take on their right perspective. Some burdens we can leave behind, others we can share, others we'll keep, but they just won't seem so heavy. I even wonder whether he had in mind a yoke for a pair of oxen – so when he says "my yoke" he actually means one he will share with us – and that is why he can call it easy, because we do not bear the burden alone.

So may we have the child-like ability to see where Jesus truly is, and where he is at work. May we have the willingness to join in with him, and may we discover that taking his yoke is the way to true freedom. Amen.