

6th Sunday after Pentecost 2023. Matthew 11:15-19, 25-30

Come to me

Today's gospel passage is really a tale of two passages, each a lesson in confounding expectations and contain what I think are the three most beautiful words in the New Testament, when Jesus tells the weary and burdened to 'Come to me.' "Come to me ... for I am gentle and humble in heart' (Matt 11:28-29).

Let's first look at the context of today's reading. Over the last three week's readings from Matthew, we have heard a string of passages of Jesus talking about mission. That ends today and it's a whole different scene. John the Baptist, has been imprisoned, and the verses immediately before today's text shows that John the Baptist has heard of all that Jesus is doing and wants to know with certainty that he is Israel's messiah, so he sends his disciples to ask Jesus directly (Matt 11:1-14). This is where we come in today and what follows from this question about Jesus' messiahship in today's text centres on the nature of *perception and expectation*: who are John and Jesus?

The crowds appear ready to judge only on the basis of the company John and Jesus kept. John played the part of a social misfit, a throwback prophet to someone like Elijah. Our reading today shows many thought John demon possessed (v. 18). Jesus, on the other hand, associated himself with sinners and tax collectors. Therefore, the crowds concluded, he must be "a glutton and a drunkard" (v. 19).

Jesus points out that God's will has been made known in more than one way through different kinds of people, and yet still isn't recognized. Jesus' question to the crowd regarding John the Baptist back in v.7, just before today's text is a good one: "What did you come into the wilderness to look at?" (11:7). We ask ourselves the same thing. What are our expectations or perceptions of a prophet's vocation or Jesus' behaviour? And how do our expectations, and the little conditions they contain, prevent us from recognizing the will of God in human form?

These passages remind us precisely of our inability to box Jesus (and John) in, even if, like Peter on the mountain of transfiguration, (17:4) we are so often ready to build shelters

around our understandings of who God's Son is. Of Jesus were a mere reflection of the people he saves, we would need to somehow gather together a million mirror images. But Jesus points out that divine wisdom defies such categories and is to be judged by deeds not perceptions (v.19). As anyone in ministry quickly realises, there is more than one way to disappoint people who expected you to be different somehow!

In the second section of this passage, it is now *our* expectations of discipleship that are challenged. A shift in voice and tone occurs: "At that time," Jesus says, and prays a wonderful prayer that reminds us of his high priestly prayer in John 17...". I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do." ²⁷ "All things have been committed to me by my Father..." (vv.25-27).

Then Jesus gives the beautiful invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, 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." (Matthew 11:28-30).

Here Jesus says, "learn from me" (v.29), but he means more than head learning or overcoming a gap in knowledge; it is the adoption of a way of life. And this way of life is expressed in terms of doing and being something in relation to Jesus. Jesus does this because it is based in his relationship with his Father, 'all things have been committed to me by my Father' (verse 27).

When we do come to Jesus as he invites us to today, we come into proper or 'right' relationship to Father and Son. This relationship is light and easy, it isn't a burden at all, but rather, it lifts burdens!

The promise of rest should not be taken as going away somewhere to find rest, but rather a way of life that produces mental and spiritual rest. The language recalls what God said to Moses. To ease Moses's anxiety about the uncertainty of the wilderness journey, God promises to accompany God's people along the way: "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest" (Exodus 33:14).

As disciples, we do not simply attempt to duplicate the actions of an absent master; on the contrary, we rely on the ongoing presence of Jesus himself. This, too, is included in what Jesus means by "rest." As Matthew reminds us early on, Jesus bears the name of the one promised in Isaiah: Immanuel, "God with us" (1:23). All who take the yoke of discipleship upon them can experience a kind of new creation sustained by the ongoing presence of the Creator in a life of discipleship.

It is only fitting, therefore, that Matthew's Gospel ends with the assurance of Jesus' ongoing presence: "I am with you, even to the very end of the age" (28:20). Thus Jesus has effectively taken over God's promise and in his own life, to which we can become apprenticed, he embodies God's presence. He can make this invitation because "all authority in heaven and earth" have been given to him" (28:18).

Among the characteristics of Jesus in this passage is his being "gentle" or, as the older translations had it, "meek." Matthew recalls Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount – the "meek shall inherit the earth." The gentle shall inherit the earth. Being gentle is not being a doormat. Being gentle is not 'uncool.' Inheriting the earth is being a child of God and with Jesus we are co-heirs. Co-heirs with Jesus of the whole new heaven and new earth that will come to pass when Jesus returns!

Being gentle is knowing that everyone comes to God in different ways and no one – absolutely no one – is not loved by God as if they were the only person on the planet. Knowing this love of and for ourselves, we naturally are gentle with everyone, not superior or arrogant, because we know that everyone is created in the image of God, just like us. We are gentle because Jesus is gentle.

Today's gospel shows Jesus to be the true and only 'revealer,' it teaches that he is the source of spiritual rest, and it tells us that he is humble and gentle. But this is not about church teaching or facts about Jesus to be memorised. It is rather an invitation to redirect our lives.

In today's reading, when Jesus says, "learn from me," he is saying learn by doing what I do, in the power of the Holy Spirit and living like Jesus. The truth of our being children of God is in the living. To read about feeding the hungry is one thing; to feed them is quite another and

is what is required. But this is a light and easy burden, as it is in our recreated nature to do just this.

It is precisely in a life of discipleship that Jesus' presence is guaranteed. If we feel compelled to "bring" or "take" Jesus with us wherever we go, we will find our expectations overturned every time. Lest we forget who Jesus is, Matthew makes it clear from beginning to end: God with us, even to the end of the age!