

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Trinity, 5th July 2020.

Our readings today present a curious picture of a topsy-turvy world where nobody seems to understand what is going on any more and where “received wisdom” appears to be, well ... no longer received as wisdom. With both of them familiar from other contexts (Zechariah 9:9 on Palm Sunday, and Matthew 11:28-30 from the “comfortable words” of the communion service) we are not even used to seeing them side by side in this way.

Zechariah speaks of a world where a conquering king makes his entrance on a little donkey rather than a rather more imposing mount, and where peace and prosperity are offered to nations rather more used to violence and oppression as a way of life. And Jesus speaks of the hypocrisy of those who seek only to criticise others whatever they do – the asceticism of John the Baptist or the indulgence of Jesus himself. Like those who play the victim despite their comparative prosperity, or those who are more interested in propagating social unrest rather than any genuine cause for the advancement of mankind, Jesus has little time for those whose primary interest is in themselves.

When he compares his generation to a bunch of lazy youths, hanging out in the town centres bellyaching about how the world seems to have little interest in their whining complaints and even less in dancing to their childish tunes, we don’t have to make a great leap of imagination to find comparisons with our own, or indeed any, generation. Such is life, especially today.

So who is right? The young people with their contradictory and simplistic ideals, or the old people with their outdated and irrelevant attitudes? The Right with their Gospel of prosperity through self-sufficiency, or the Left with their ideals of universal opportunity for oppressed and marginalised people? The authoritarians with their strictly imposed moral order, or the libertarians with their desire to do whatever they want in the name of freedom?

I don’t know how you should vote, I’m afraid. Wrong place. But I do know what Jesus had to say: If you want to know what God wills, look no further than my teaching, he says. If you are tired of the burden of all this argument, fighting, racism, inequality, recession, unemployment, sexism, poverty, cruelty, NHS, taxation, hypocrisy, fear, and daily changes in regulation – come to me and I will give you rest. It may seem a curious thing to say that his yoke is easy and his burden is light, given that last week we were hearing of the difficult life of a prophetic people, but I see it a bit like this:

“Easy” and “light” can both have the meaning of inconsequential in English, but “easy can also mean “straightforward,” and light can also mean “uncomplicated.” In translation the choice is ours. Jesus does not ask anything other than that we love God and neighbour, that we adopt a strong sense of morality and apply it to ourselves and our choices, and that we adopt a strong sense of permissiveness and apply it to others and theirs. So much of what he saw was the other way round.

And we see the same. Perhaps if we spent more time asking ourselves whether we live up the standards we aspire to, and more effort in asking others what they need to be fully themselves, instead of telling them what to do and grumbling about how we are so hard done by, we might see a bit less social unrest and a bit more peace and prosperity. These are more than just fancy philosophical ideas in a confused political arena; they are a way of life for Christians in seeking to follow God’s will in his created world in this and every generation.

It seems that we do have the answer after all. Perhaps we should tell someone.

Amen.