

Sermon for Trinity 4 2020

¹⁶ "But to what shall I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market places and calling to their playmates, ¹⁷ 'We piped to you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; ¹⁹ the Son of man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Matthew 15.16-19a

Some years ago a visiting bishop and I were returning to the church in Sydney. The bishop had preached during the morning services and we had been out to lunch. On the way home we walked past central railway station. All perfectly normal. There was a street person with the mandatory cardboard sign requesting money for some supposed personal need. I may sound callous when using such a description, but the cardboard signs belong to a central person and the person begging in the street will see very little of the money generously given.

On that basis we walked past and did not offer any money. Another street person walking towards us watched us walk past. In a rage he screamed out, "that would be right, go on walk past the beggar. What are you, paedophiles?" You can insert suitable adjectives to fill out the total sentences.

That event comes to mind whenever I read this section of the gospel according to Matthew. "We piped to you and you did not dance". The focus is very seriously on generating doubt, disbelief, and fault. John the Baptist was accused of having a demon; Jesus was described as a glutton and a drunkard. The message is clear, if we are determined to find fault, we will.

Matthew has recorded a conversation which is very sobering, alarming, and confronting. It sounds like Jesus is addressing a bunch of petulant children. We think about the people in his life who were determined not to accept Jesus as the Son of God. We know from scripture that Jesus is the fulfilment of the prophecies of the Old Testament writings. The prophecies declared that the Messiah would come and that when he came, he would reveal God to the world. Jesus, God, walked among them performing miracles, healing the sick, even raising the dead. There is very little doubt that he is the visible sign of God on earth.

He was rejected because he challenged the normal understanding of the faith. He was rejected because he wanted people to exercise a faith which was very pointedly an exercise of love. We are to love God, love our neighbour, love our enemies. This is very different to the ancient faith which was firmly based in behaviour and Law. A faith which said for the most part, "Thou shalt not". Or perhaps "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."

Jesus came with a message that would demand a change of lifestyle, a dramatic change in how we are to experience God. The miracles themselves should be enough for the people to sit up and take notice. Sadly they did not appear to change. They failed to change their lifestyle to truly absorb the teaching of Jesus. They simply called him a drunkard and a glutton. Why? Because he sat and dined with tax collectors and sinners. These characters were not there to be loved, they were in society as people to be condemned and hated.

When it came to being confronted with a miracle the crowd did not adopt the miracle as evidence of the reality of Jesus, they only talked about them as if they were something of which they needed to be wary. We recall they accused Jesus of being Beelzebub, the prince of demons. The critics claimed that it was only by calling on evil that Jesus could do these things. At no point do they accept that Jesus has the power and authority of God to perform the miracles. The miracles, the signs, were introduced to help the people respond to God. Instead of accepting the miracles as God-given, Jesus was accused of being evil. The pharisees stated very clearly that the miracles performed by Jesus were the work of the devil.

At every level, the gatekeepers tried to explain away the miracles. The one miracle that could not be satisfactorily explained away was that of the resurrection of our Lord after the crucifixion. Of course, they tried to explain it away. They claimed that someone had stolen the body. Any excuse to deny the resurrection was accepted by some. To deny the resurrection is not only impossible, it is silly.

Jesus begins to explain the reality of his position with the Father. We can almost hear him say, "Now children, please be quiet. I have something very important to say to you. If you listen very carefully you will recognise me as the Son of God." He speaks to petulant children.

He explains that all things are given to him by the Father. He quite rightly points out that no one knows the Father except the Son and no one knows the Son except the Father. In several places in scripture he states quite simply that he and the Father are one. In the gospel of John Jesus asks Philip how he can demand that Jesus show him the Father. Jesus response is very simple, if you have seen me, you have seen the Father.

The reality is that Jesus is God on earth. We may have difficulty imagining who and in what form the Father may be, but we have no trouble recognising the form of the Son. When my grandson asked whether God wore socks, I was able to explain that we really do not know what God looks like, but he did send his Son and we know very well what he looks like. No doubt Jesus wore socks in the cold weather because he was just like us, and just like his Father.

Perhaps it is because of the innocence that we see in children that Jesus was moved to thank his Father for hiding the message of salvation from the wise and learned while revealing this same message to those he describes as babies. It seems that the wise and learned would seek to talk about the message while the innocent would accept the message and respond to God in faith.

This section of the gospel of Matthew concludes with that wonderful and reassuring invitation. *"²⁸ Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

As many of you are aware a yoke is a frame that is placed across the shoulders of two bullocks so that the load to be pulled along was shared between the two. We might think of

our load being shared with Jesus. We do not have to carry the load on our own for Jesus is yoked alongside of us. In this way our burden is reduced.

The reality of our faith is that we are constantly seeking God. We respond to the miracles by accepting that they are God given opportunities to believe. We take our Lord Jesus into our lives and we pray to him and through him. We accept that in our faith there is not only salvation in the eternal, but strength and understanding, comfort and hope in our temporal life.

There will always be people who will take every opportunity to find fault and exercise doubt. There will always be people who will take the current media focus on paedophile clergy and accuse all clergy of being sexual deviants.

We do not have to accept that generalisation as being true of all believers. We are to be true to ourselves and stand tall, for we shall one day stand before the Father, forgiven, reconciled and saved.