

## Reflection from Revd Ali Massey for Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July 2020 – Trinity 4

The people of God in Jesus' time had many burdens, they were living under an army of occupation. They were an agrarian economy so were subject to the vagaries of the weather, and there was a great disparity between the wealthy and the poor causing tensions. And they also had some really cumbersome religious rules to live by.

At the moment, we are all trying very hard to follow new guidance and regulations to keep us safe from Coronavirus. One thing that has become clear; the messages that we are to follow have to be simple, easy to understand and easy to put in practice. 'Stay home, save lives and protect the NHS' was easy to understand. 'Stay alert, control the virus and save lives' is harder to understand and the regulations that we need to comply with, as you are experiencing now, are more complicated.

The complicated religious rules that the people of God were trying to follow were not from God but were man-made. The religious authorities had, over time, reinterpreted the 10 commandments that Moses brought down from the mountain. Unfortunately, by trying to clarify the 10 commandments so that they were easier to understand they had actually ended up with a myriad of sometimes contradictory regulations.

For example; God's command to keep Sabbath is not to work, but what did that mean in practice? The basic premise of Sabbath is to rest, to be restored physically by not doing normal jobs, to be restored spiritually by spending time in worship, and to be restored socially by spending time with family and friends. But many of the rules regarding how to keep Sabbath had become a burden in themselves with long debates about, for example, how far could you walk on the Sabbath before it was considered work? Each of the commandments had been multiplied into a total of 613, sometimes contradictory, regulations that were virtually impossible to keep. The extra rules had become a yoke of slavery to the regulations, instead of the simple '10 best ways to live' that Moses had brought down the mountain from God.

So, into this mix of devout confusion we have Jesus and John the Baptist, both of whom are deeply religious, but they express their closeness to God in very different ways. John by living simply in the desert, surviving on the most basic of foodstuffs but bringing a new message to the people of God. Then Jesus, declaring the kingdom of God has come near, appears to turn the laws of religious and social convention upside down, by associating with the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the tax collectors and the prostitutes.

The people of God were confused and in our Gospel passage today (Matthew 11: 16 – 19, 25 to the end), Jesus is expressing his frustration, that the people of God cannot see through the labyrinthine layers of human-made law into the truth of the kingdom of God that both he and John are trying to share.

The religious authorities accuse John of being a demon, and Jesus of being a glutton. Jesus, despite his frustration understands why the authorities accuse them in this way. Jesus knew that the religious authorities had become slaves to the man-made laws rather than being freed by the truth that he and John have been offering. Religiosity has become a burden to all the people of God.

Jesus offers to take that burden away, to replace the yoke of slavery to the law by the light and easy yoke of living in the 10 best ways, with Jesus walking alongside as the guide. Jesus hadn't come to abolish the law and the prophets but to complete them. To offer all the people of God a new and easy to understand way of being with God and each other.

But what about us, here in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? If we are feeling burdened, in our lives and in our faith journey, perhaps we need to look at the burdens we are carrying. Where have those burdens come from? Who has placed those burdens on us? Is it voices from our past that may have been

relevant for a season, but when they are looked at in the cold light of day, are no longer relevant. Or is it patterns of behaviour that we find ourselves habitually repeating, even though we know we shouldn't? Or is it confusion about how we should live our lives, by the standards of the world or by kingdom standards?

St Paul, in today's epistle (Romans chapter 7 verses 15 – 25) eloquently describes the struggle between our human nature and our desire to follow the path of righteousness. Very often we have that internal conversation between what we know is right and what we want to do. Those struggles can be about very small, insignificant things, 'I know I should do the washing up before I sit down to watch the TV but I don't want to' or they can be about the bigger questions about what it means to be human. 'I know that what I want diminishes you, but I want it anyway'. Paul describes this struggle between our sinful nature and the laws of God as a burden that makes him and us wretched. But Paul also gives us the answer. We don't have to carry this burden on our own. Jesus rescues us from that continuous struggle. Jesus who is our template for living, the one who simplifies everything for us. All the law and the prophets completed in him, we just need to love God and to love one another as ourselves. It is a simple, clear and easy to understand message.

Jesus calls to us today and says:

"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."

#### **A prayer from St Teresa of Avila**

May today there be peace within.

May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May you use those gifts that you have received, and pass on the love that has been given to you.

May you be content knowing you are a child of God.

Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love.

It is there for each and every one of us

Amen