

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : 4th Sunday after Trinity ~ July 9, 2017

I was on a bus this week and overheard a couple talking – well I think they were more quietly arguing. But I did catch one bit when the woman said to the man ‘Oh, you’re so childish’. Then I started to read the gospel reading set for today – where, lo and behold, here is Jesus accusing the crowd of being childish: petulant, awkward, stamping their feet, prone to tantrums and so on. But then he goes on to suggest that they need to be not childish but to be childlike. Childish and childlike of course have roughly the same definition with both relating to childhood. But of course childish has negative connotations and childlike usually does not. Childish is often synonymous with words like infantile, immature, silly, juvenile, and foolish, all of which are usually negative. Childlike is closer to words like innocent, trusting, untainted and pure: not negative. Jesus above all encourages his hearers to be trusting – to be trusting in God in the certainty that God will not put upon them more than they can bear. Jesus puts it like this at the end of Matthew chapter 11 – ‘Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, 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.’ Wonderfully encouraging and affirming words – but what do they actually mean?

In saying “my yoke is easy and my burden is light” Jesus is telling those who are weary and burdened to come to Him for rest. He isn’t so much speaking here of physical burdens but rather the heavy burden of the system of works that the Pharisees laid on the backs of the people that Jesus was offering to relieve. Later on in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for laying heavy burdens on the shoulders of the people. It has been said by biblical scholars that the Pharisees had added over 600 regulations regarding what qualified as “working” on the Sabbath. That was a heavy yoke, a heavy burden to bear!

Now of course if Jesus was to speak to us today he would probably be saying something like ‘try to tread lightly through your life and not to be weighed down when your inbox is crowded with dozens of emails which are

monopolising your day, or when your neighbours are noisily having a new extension built or when you find yourself as more of a taxi driver than a parent.

No, the passage from Matthew encourages the people – encourages us – to be childlike – to be learning, growing, wondering, questioning, reaching out – and above all to be trusting of God, remembering that God will not put upon us more than we can bear.

This all links in to an extent with the reading from Paul to the Church in Rome – though I would suggest that this is Paul writing in something of an obscure, tongue twisting way! As an aside, reading this passage reminds me of some graffiti from decades ago which ran something like this:

“To be is to do” —Socrates. “To do is to be” —Jean-Paul Sartre.

“Do be do be do” —Frank Sinatra.

But in our first reading, what I think Paul is trying to remind his readers is that they must trust in God, as he himself does, and then we will find peace of mind. In a similar way Jesus encourages those who are “heavy laden” to take His yoke upon them, and in doing so they will find rest for their souls. As the apostle John reassures us, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.” The yoke of Jesus is light and easy to carry because it is the yoke of repentance and faith followed by a singular commitment to follow Him.

When the children were speaking last week about getting ready to leave junior school and move to senior school, they expressed both their excitement and their apprehension. I’ve been thinking over these past days on my ministry as a priest – and had the same feelings. But I do remember one thing that helped: the house where I lived when I was first ordained was opposite a pub- and I shall not forget opening the windows each morning to be greeted with the neon sign ‘Take Courage’. For me it was more a message from God than from the brewery.

But of course for me and for you our Christian pilgrimage journey would have different starting points. For many it our baptism. But equally many of us might remember our confirmation – because these are the two stages in which we commit ourselves as Christians in the Anglican Church – first by Baptism and then by Confirmation. You’ll see from the notice sheet that I am beginning to

gather together the names of both adults and young people who would like to make this act of commitment for themselves. Please be assured that it is never too late to be confirmed – and indeed many adults are confirmed and find it to be a very moving stage in their life. If you have not taken this step of being prepared for confirmation, I would encourage you to think seriously about it now – you'll find the details on the cream leaflets or do come and have a word.

To be childlike is to be innocent, trusting, untainted and pure. But children also have the ability to be trusting, learning, growing, wondering, questioning, reaching out, wanting to learn, wanting to grow. Jesus encourages people then as well as people now to do the same and adopt those same qualities. Indeed this is outlined on our church's website as an introduction to Christ Church when it says that *as we explore together, we journey towards that fullness of life offered to us through Jesus Christ's self-sacrificing love. A mixture of those who are strong in their faith with others who are filled with questions and doubt, we encourage a willingness to explore our faith and be ready to be surprised by God.*

To be surprised by God. Well, may God continue to surprise us all as we walk on our pilgrim journeys – but doing so as those who are childlike and not childish, remembering that Jesus gives us his promise that “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”. Amen.