

Romans 7:15-25a**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30****Introduction**

I don't know if you've ever found yourself in a situation where no matter what you do you can't do the right thing? You do it one way and it is wrong, you do it another way and that is wrong too. I mentioned last week that what I love about the Gospels is the way we hear the authentic voice of Jesus. It echoes through the words and the situations described.

We hear it no more clearly when he is moved by compassion as, as in today's reading, by frustration at the blindness and stubbornness of the religious leaders. Jesus was saddened by the sheer perversity of human nature. To him men seemed to be like children playing in the village square. One group said to the other, "Come on and let's play at weddings." The other said "We don't feel like being happy today", then the first group said, "Alright, come on and let's play at funerals", and the others said, "We don't feel like being sad today". They were contrary. No matter what was suggested they didn't want to do it and no matter what was offered they found a fault in it.

John came, living in the desert fasting and denying himself food, isolated from the society of men, and they said of him. "The man is mad to cut himself off from human society and human pleasures like that." Jesus came, mixing with all kinds of people, sharing in their sorrows and their joys, accompanying with them in their times of joy; and they said of him, "He is a socialite, he is a party goer, he is the friend of outsiders with whom no decent person would have anything to do. They called John's asceticism madness and they called Jesus' sociability laxness of morals. They could find grounds for criticism either way.

The plain fact is that when people don't want to listen to the truth they will easily enough find an excuse for not listening to it. They do not even try to be consistent in their criticisms. They will criticize the same person and the same institution from quite opposite grounds. If people are determined to make no response they will remain stubbornly unresponsive no matter what invitation is made to them. Grown men and women can be very like spoiled children who refuse to play no matter what the game is.

Then comes Jesus' final sentence in this account. "Wisdom is shown to be right by her deeds." The ultimate verdict lies not with the cantankerous and perverse critics but with events. The Jews might criticize John for his lonely isolation, but John had moved men's hearts towards God as they had not been moved for centuries; the Jews might criticize Jesus for mixing too much in ordinary life and with ordinary people, but in him people were finding a new life and a new goodness and a new power to live as they ought and to find a new access to God.

Romans 7:15-25a**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

We can fall into the trap of doing a similar thing. It would be helpful if we didn't judge people and churches by our own prejudices and if we were to begin to give thanks for any person and any church who can bring people nearer to God, even if their methods are not the methods that suit us.

Jesus goes on to thank God that although some had not heard or responded to his message those who might appear simple or ordinary had heard and responded. He is speaking out of experience. The Rabbis and the so called wise men rejected him and the simple people welcomed and accepted him. The intellectuals had no use for him and the humble welcomed him.

Jesus is not condemning intellectual power, thinking and understanding is very important. What he is condemning is intellectual pride. The heart, not the head is the home of the Gospel. It is not cleverness that shuts God out it is pride. It is not stupidity that welcomes the Good News it is humility.

Jesus' words in this passage take aim at the culture and politics of his time as much as at the actions of individuals. Israel had layers of authorities and rulers: some religious, some put in place by the Roman Empire. This made life harder and more complicated to navigate.

At the same time, religious expression had developed more and more rules as 'fences' to ensure the people did not deviate from worshipping Yahweh as they had before the exile to Babylon. For example, the Law prohibits work on the Sabbath; the religious leaders would say, 'If an item has no use on Sabbath, don't even handle it!' This meant that the people were less likely to break God's Law, but it also meant that the Law itself had become a burden. It led to a people missing God's messenger in John the Baptist – because of his fasting – and to being in danger of missing God's message in Jesus because of his eating and drinking with those he was reaching out to.

These 'fences' had become the focus rather than the God of love who was at the heart of things. Jesus mocks the religious leaders and invites all Israel to accept a new 'yoke' from him, one that they will be able to manage and that will allow them to know God as was always intended. This week's reading calls us to look at ourselves: are we set in ways that

Romans 7:15-25a**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

complicate what God wants for us or asks of us, ways that make it harder to know that we belong to God? Jesus invites us to quite deliberately link ourselves to him and to do only what he asks of us.

Jesus spoke to people who were desperately trying to find God and desperately trying to be good, who were finding the tasks impossible and were driven to weariness and despair. He says, "Come to me all you who are exhausted". His invitation is to those who were wearied by the search for the truth. The poet Yeats said this, "Can one reach God by toil? He gives himself to the pure in heart. He asks nothing but our attention" The way to know God is not by mental search, but by giving attention to Jesus Christ, for in him we see what God is like.

He says, "Come to me all you who are weighed down beneath your burdens". For the orthodox Jew religion was a thing of burden. Jesus said of the scribes and Pharisees, "They bind heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on men's shoulders." (Matthew 23:4) To the Jew religion was a thing of endless rules. Someone lived their life in a forest of regulations which dictated every action and aspect of their life. People were for ever listening to a voice which said, "Thou shalt not"

Jesus came to show that religion was not about rules or propositions. It is about relationship with the mighty God who loves us more than we can begin to imagine. Jesus invites us to take his yoke upon our shoulders. The word yoke indicates submission and in Jesus day the people struggled under a yoke of submission to rules and regulations. But Jesus tells us that his Yoke fits well. What he means is that the life he gives us is not a burden to wear us down, the task he calls us to is made to measure and fits us perfectly. Whatever God sends us is made to measure to fit our needs and our abilities exactly.

Romans 7:15-25a**Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30**

Jesus said, "My burden is light". It isn't necessarily that the burden is easy to carry but it is laid on us in love, it is meant to be carried in love, and love makes even the heaviest burden light.

And we need to consider whether, as church communities, we lay burdens on people as they come to faith. Do we give people extra rules to follow beyond that simple call to keep in step with Jesus? Do we give ourselves extra definitions of what it means to be holy, to be good Christians? We need to avoid complicating our gospel for ourselves and for others.

Life is full of pressures – work, family, running a home. And often church adds to those pressures – being on rotas, running home groups, trying to be what we think God wants us to be. This passage can help us to reflect on what it is that Jesus offers as he calls us to himself – something other than the stresses of church life and trying to live up to an image of myself that is unrealistic. His call is simple. Come to him as we are, put our trust in him and allow us to fill us with his presence and transform our lives.