

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Sunday 9th July 2023
The Fifth Sunday after Trinity

Collect

Almighty God,
send down upon your Church
the riches of your Spirit,
and kindle in all who minister the gospel
your countless gifts of grace;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Romans 7:15-25a

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. But in fact it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells within me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.

So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Matthew 11:16-19, 25-end

‘But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another,
“We played the flute for you, and you did not dance;
we wailed, and you did not mourn.”

For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.’

At that time Jesus said, ‘I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

‘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.’

Sermon

Once a month at 8 am we used the Book of Common Prayer for the service of Holy Communion. For some the traditional language is now outdated, but for others there is a timelessness about it. At one time, those who attended Holy Communion regularly would know the service by heart. Unlike our current services which have seasonal variations, the Book of Common Prayer was a constant.

It is fair to say that Thomas Cranmer, to whom the Book of Common Prayer is attributed, certainly recognised the sinfulness of humanity. The confessions are fulsome, and he doesn't underplay our unworthiness. Nevertheless, one of the beauties of his theology is that he also recognised that alongside our unworthiness sits the awesome grace of God. And so, partway through the service, when we have confessed our sins and received absolution, we hear what are rather wonderfully known as the "comfortable words" and begin with some of the words that we have just heard in this morning's gospel reading, introduced in the following way:

"Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.
Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you."

For all that I relish the fact that we have largely moved away from theologies of fire & brimstone; hell, fire & damnation; and self-flagellation, there is something about the comfortable words that I do believe we need to hear time and again. In the worries and challenges of daily life, of which there are plenty, we need to know that there is a place where we can find rest.

I wonder whether those words resonate for you at the moment. I wonder whether there are anxieties and concerns bubbling away in your life, and you long for some relief. I wonder what those things are.

I recently a few days on retreat with those people who were ordained priest last Saturday morning at Guildford cathedral. For all of them this is a time of anticipation and excitement; there is a hope and perhaps even expectation of vocation being fulfilled. And yet while all of them longed to be able to focus exclusively on their impending ordination, for many there were other things going on in their lives which presented anxieties and concerns; which meant that they were not necessarily able to focus in quite the way that they would have liked.

It's probably the story of all of our lives at one time or another. Most of us will have had experience of balancing a range of priorities. The demands of work alongside bringing up a family; caring responsibilities for older and younger generations all at once; trying to fit study or spare time interests alongside work and family commitments. I wonder whether you can recognise that sense of longing for a stillness. For an ability to focus on just one thing.

At different times the heart of that longing lies in different places. Sometimes it is a longing for reassurance that everything will turn out well. That we have made the right decision. That we have started out on the right path. Sometimes that turning out well has a very specific focus – we want to know that our children will be safe; that those we love will be well. What causes us to be unsettled is so often the sense that these things that are so fundamental to our wellbeing are simply out of our control.

I have been reading a book by a Canadian theologian, Kate Bowler, called “Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I’ve Loved.” Kate Bowler’s academic research took her into countless American churches founded on the prosperity gospel – the idea that the depth of our faith will bring good things in our lives, and specifically wealth and wellness. Having spent a great deal of time with these communities, Bowler was diagnosed with stage 4 bowel cancer, and initially told that she would be unlikely to survive for two years.

In the context of those who preach the prosperity gospel, she was frequently faced with such comments as “everything happens for a reason” – as well as a fervent conviction that sufficient prayer would provide a physical cure. In the book, Bowler describes the real experience. How she really felt. The unhelpfulness of such comments. What she really discovered – and is continuing to discover.

At the heart of much of what she says is that as human beings we long for control. Not usually in a completely dominating sense, but we simply want to be able to have a sense of cause and effect. We want to be able to choose what we do, knowing something of what the consequences will be.

We have probably all had times in our lives which have demonstrated to us just how impossible that can be. That circumstances can happen, over which we have little or no influence, that impact us in profoundly significant ways.

When Jesus says: ‘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’, he is speaking into our very human situation. He is showing us how intensely he understands our desire for control; to know what is going to happen next; to be able to choose our actions, knowing the consequences that they will have. And he is also saying that he knows exactly how it feels when we find that we really aren’t able to change the things that matter to us most. That we can’t cure someone of their terminal illness; that we can’t prevent our children from taking paths that hurt and damage them; that for all our ability to choose so many things, we cannot always anticipate the consequences.

Of course part of the reason that this is such an intensely human challenge is because we *do* have choices, and we do have the ability to understand some of the potential consequences of our actions. Sometimes we will recognise that the reason something hasn’t turned out well is because we’ve made a bad decision. Responsibility is something many of us understand very well.

And yet there are many things over which we have no control. That are not our responsibility. Sometimes those are the things that affect us the most. It is when we are plagued by worry about these things that we most need to hear Jesus’s words of comfort and refreshment. That we need to know deep down that we are not responsible and, inasmuch as we are able, cast our burden on the Lord.

Kate Bowler does not pretend that any of this is easy. She longs to be able to find the right prayer to ensure that she’ll be cured. She longs to be able to make plans for a future that she can guarantee. And yet her book is testimony to the discovery of the beauty that we find in life, especially when that beauty is set alongside the pain. In a sense they might be two sides of the same coin. She speaks of experiencing love in a way that she had never understood before. And she speaks, too, of a

growing appreciation of the here and now. Of ordinary time. Of almost drinking in the beauty of each moment, and experiencing it as gift.

Of course worry and anxiety are part of our human lives. But the invitation this morning is to hear those words of Jesus afresh, and see if we can discover just a little more about what it might mean to leave some of those worries at Jesus's feet, and notice the possible gift of each and every moment.

Amen