

REFLECTION FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY
05.07.2020
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Psalm 145: 8-14 & Matthew 11: 16-19, 25-30

For all its limitations and frustrations, lockdown life has been pretty straightforward in some respects. We've understood that our task has been to stay at home as much as possible and to follow social distancing rules whenever we do venture out.

With the lifting of certain restrictions and the return of some freedoms, life becomes altogether more complicated. We now have decisions to make and only we can make them.

And so many will have had to decide whether they can risk entering into a support bubble with another household and/or determine whether they will now go out for a meal or a drink. Pretty much everyone will have to consider whether to risk a haircut. Then there's the choice to be made about holidays and foreign travel. And, for those in leadership positions within faith communities, there's the huge decision to be made about whether to re-open premises for worship.

In taking these and other such decisions, we have to weigh up conflicting messages and arguments all the while aware that Covid-19 hasn't gone away and that people are still being infected and dying. Such knowledge reminds us that, whilst certain activities are now permitted, it doesn't necessarily mean that we want - or think it wise - to do them just yet.

Today marks the 72nd anniversary of the founding of the NHS. Last night we put a light in our windows to remember those who've died during this pandemic. Tonight, we'll return to our doorsteps to clap today's NHS workers once again. It's right that we celebrate the life of this incredible institution, that we give thanks for those putting their lives on the line in the NHS today, that we pause to remember those who have lost their lives whilst trying to protect others. But we know too that taking good decisions in the days, weeks and months to come remains the best way to honour and protect the NHS and its workers.

I don't know about any of you but the task of weighing up the pros and cons of certain courses of action for myself and others has been weighing heavily upon me of late. I know it's a hackneyed phrase, but it has felt at times as if I've had

the weight of the world upon my shoulders. It might have felt the same for you. But I can only speak for me and I know that feeling this weight has had an effect on how I've felt within myself and on how I've been with others. In short, I'll be honest with you - I've been pretty grumpy, I've moaned constantly about the Government's decisions and messages and at times I've reacted/over-reacted to situations at home and said things in ways that I wish I hadn't. I'm sorry about this.

My guess is that others will recognise something of themselves in this description: that when things start getting to them, they take it out on others. If so, it's perhaps helpful to note that we're in good company. As today's gospel reading shows us, Jesus could be pretty tetchy when the weight of the world was bearing down upon his shoulders. Noting this doesn't excuse bad behaviour, of course, but perhaps it might help us to be gentler on ourselves when we've used words unkindly and a little more forgiving of others when they have done so towards us.

Put very simply, the frustration, for Jesus, is that God is continually singing a new song, but it doesn't seem to matter what the tune is, the people aren't hearing it for what it is. He must be asking himself, 'How am I ever going to get through to these people? How can my work ever prove fruitful? How can I ever change anything?'

It's funny how, when we're at our most exasperated, the vocabulary that we use so often turns what we say into a prayer. 'God, give me patience.' 'Jesus Christ, give me strength.'

If we were feeling particularly self-righteous, we might accuse someone who used such language of blasphemy, of 'taking the Lord's name in vain'. But surely God's big enough to cope with such trifling things. Abusing or killing people in God's name or (as we've touched on in recent weeks) trading people and justifying such actions with reference to holy scriptures - that's another matter entirely - but I think God can readily forgive occasional cries of exasperation.

And in any case, who says that there's anything to forgive? Maybe such utterances are prayers (asking for help) bursting to the surface from somewhere deep within us.

Jesus's 'I thank you, father...' words that we heard may not be exactly the same thing as the cries of the person struggling with difficult decisions or the person

struggling to be a good parent or child or employee - or whatever it is that is weighing heavily upon someone at a particular time - but there's something similar going on here.

A very real sense of frustration and exasperation, that has seen Jesus lose his cool, flows directly into a prayer - and in this moment something helps Jesus to see that some are able to hear God's new song, that it is breaking through in some unexpected places. The learn-ed and the so-called wise may not be 'getting it' but (as Tom Wright puts it) "the 'little people' - the poor, the sinners, the tax-collectors, ordinary folk - were." (Matthew for Everyone, Part 1, p136)

And somewhere in all of this, as Jesus sees things with greater clarity, something changes in him and that weight on his shoulders that seemed to be all but crushing him moments before is lifted.

When Jesus emerges from the prayer and addresses the crowd again, he singles out those who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens and offers to help take their load. That's some kind of change, some kind of turnaround. The time spent in prayer has helped Jesus to understand where his efforts need to lie, who it is that most needs his time and attention.

As we emerge from lockdown and as restrictions slowly continue to ease, we'll all have difficult decisions to make and these may well weigh heavily upon us. The desire to get back to normal is understandably overwhelming but if we wish to attune ourselves to God's hopes and dreams and desires for us, then perhaps this episode from Jesus' life reminds us that our first thought cannot be for what we most want - we too have to come to see that our first concern has to be for the most vulnerable amongst us including those whom much of society has been prepared to overlook or shun or value too cheaply for way too long.

The good news for us is, that if we can look at the world and approach life in such a way, we will not be alone. 'Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest' says Jesus, '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.'