

14th Sunday of Ordinary Time 2017

Fr Peter Groves

Matthew 11.25-30

This morning's gospel could probably divide this congregation with a simple test. Fortunately, this is not a church where the preacher asks for the sort of audience participation which has the average English worshipper squirming in his or her seat. If it were, I could utter the following words: Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all who truly turn to him. And those of you above a certain age would all be able to continue the quotation: Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you. Those are the beginning of the so called "Comfortable words", from the Communion Service in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. When I was young, I thought the old verb "travail" – work – was in fact "travel" – journey –

and didn't quite understand why those who travelled seemed to be so favoured. I have just returned from a few days break. I knew that the Almighty was nudging me towards a return to work when I stopped at a service station on the M4 in search not of comfortable words but of a comfort break, and on my way into the public facilities almost bumped into three ladies I knew from Oxford. Not, perhaps, very much of a sign, until I add the fact that all three were Church of England nuns in full habit.

The Prayer Book has the comfortable words as a link between the pronouncement of absolution following the confession, and the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer. They provide, in other words, scriptural assurance that Christ is faithful to his promise, that forgiveness comes through him, and that his followers can live in his presence. Come to me, he says, with a voice which welcomes and with arms which are open.

In their context in Matthew's gospel, these words are harder to fathom. Our gospel began "At that time, Jesus declared: I thank you father that you have hidden these things from the learned and the wise and revealed them to mere children. Yes father, for that is what it pleased you to do. All things are given to me by my father, and no-one knows the son except the father, and no-one knows the father except the son and those to whom the son chooses to reveal him." These words might not sound odd to you – they sound like gospel words – but they sound like the words of one particular gospel, the Gospel of John. And here we are in Matthew. They come, it seems from nowhere – immediately beforehand Jesus has been pronouncing woes upon the two towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida. Theologians sometimes call these words "the Johannine thunderbolt", because they seem to be a little chunk of John nestling in the middle of Matthew.

In fact, we should be looking further back than John, because in the Book of Exodus, Moses says that God knows him, and prays that he himself might know God. One of Matthew's constant themes is that Jesus, the new lawgiver, is the new and greater Moses, the one who is not only known by God, but knows him intimately, as father to son. Jesus is the one who inaugurates the new covenant, a covenant which replaces that of Moses for all time, a covenant marked by the presence of God himself in words and deeds so extraordinary that they confound the wise and the learned but are revealed to mere infants. And these infants are so chosen because they are those who are closest in worldly terms to Christ himself; take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart. Meekness, simplicity, trust: these are the characteristics by which we learn, the characteristics of being a disciple.

The Jesus who speaks the comfortable words is the Jesus who has just condemned the towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida, towns which seem indifferent to his presence among them. They are destined for disaster because they have failed to perceive what has been happening before their eyes. We learn something here about the all too prevalent sin of cynicism: those who dismiss him are those who have seen his works, have heard his voice, and have turned their disparaging backs upon him. How often have we done the same, for fear that the words of Christ, that the call of the gospel might actually affect, alter, threaten our comfortable little lives. Comfort, we think, involves keeping things as they are.

The comfort of Christ, however, is startling. It comes from nowhere, like the thunderbolt we call the incarnation. It comes in fierce and unrelenting love, love which burns itself through

the back which we turn upon it, love which gives itself completely to the extinguishing scorn, to the cold and wet disdain which self-regarding humanity pours upon it, love which the world thinks it can isolate, contain, put out. This is not comfort in the sense of security, it is comfort in the sense of warmth, and not just warmth, but heat, searing heat which no amount of lukewarm shoulder shrugging can ever truly dismiss.

The comfort of Christ involves taking a yoke, putting on a burden in order to discover that what we think is arduous is actually easy, and what we think restricts us is the true freedom of life in Christ. The yoke which we take is the cross, the burden of our sin and weakness lifted from us by another, loaded on to his own burden, cancelled and defeated. The cross is our assurance that the sin we produce and encounter cannot and will not have the last word, the knowledge that the comfort of half truths is no

comfort at all and that true life is gained by the loss of life – his on that cross, ours in our baptism.

Our comfort is nothing other than the presence of Christ, alive to us in the gospel, present to us in the sacrament. It is not an accident that the words “take this holy sacrament to your comfort” are used in the same Prayer Book Communion Service to invite those present to confess their sins. The assurance of our salvation in Jesus Christ is an assurance, yes, but it is also a challenge. To know the comfort of Christ is to be assured that when we think we have the answer we have failed to ask the right questions, to be certain that nothing about our own lives is certain except the fact that they must be lived in the shadow of the cross of Christ. How that cashes out for each of us might vary enormously, but one thing must be common: the service of

others is the service of God, because the comfort of self is not the comfort of Christ.