

## **14<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Year A 2020**

### **Matthew 11.25-30**

It's a well-known ecclesiastical truth that male clergy are afraid of nuns. When almost twenty years ago I first began saying mass for the All Saints community in East Oxford, Sr Margaret was already a legend. She had joined the sisterhood more than fifty years earlier, had undergone a full nursing training, and had worked in London and abroad and latterly in Oxford where the institution we now call St John's Home had been part of the sisters remit for a long time. When I encountered her, she was the sacristan, responsible for everything which went on in the chapel, including the rota for visiting priests. Once the mass was over, the celebrant knew that Sr Margaret would bustle fiercely into the sacristy before there was time to depart, open the diary and ink in the next occasion when one was required to be present.

In the larger scale sung masses, on Sundays and festivals, the residents of St John's Home were invited to join, and a collection of wheelchairs and other apparatus were steered in and carefully positioned as Margaret, and only Margaret, thought appropriate. Those days were some time ago, and Margaret has long since gone to her reward, but at her requiem mass, an old friend and resident gave a wonderful eulogy, in which she happily recalled the first words Sr Margaret had ever spoken to her. They were "You will SIT where I have PUT YOU!"

As I was moving chairs and marking out seating in preparation for this mass, the example of Sr Margaret was not far from my mind. You may or may not like the place where you have been seated this morning. We can only apologise to those of you who are far from your favoured spot, but we know that you know it is not our fault. The lack of cushions and pew runners presents a further problem. A couple of weeks ago on the post mass Sunday Zoom call there was a discussion of vintage children's programmes on BBC radio and television. I'm

afraid the question “Are you sitting comfortably?” is probably not appropriate this morning.

Except, of course, that our gospel hints at comfort. The words we heard from Matthew 11.28 “Come unto me, all who labour or are heavy laden, and I will give you rest”, are known to many English speakers as “the comfortable words”, because of their use in the Communion Service of the Book of Common Prayer. Here they are introduced with the exhortation to “Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith, unto all that truly turn to him.” The Prayer Book has these “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 the gospels, 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.

But there remains an oddity about these comfortable words, and that oddity resides in those words about taking on the yoke of Jesus. It seems that these words they do not relieve us of a burden, but rather they invite us to take a burden on. This is not our normal sense of comfort. If Jesus is refreshing us, or giving us rest,

wouldn't we expect the things which weigh us down to be lifted from us? If so, why are we told to shoulder a yoke, rather than to set one down?

One answer, is that in order to bear Christ's burden, we do need to be relieved of our own. An animal can only shoulder one yoke at a time. It is not a question of moving from completely weightless freedom to carrying something heavy, but a question of replacing those existing things which weigh us down, with something else. If to shoulder the yoke of Christ is to be refreshed or to obtain rest, then we can safely draw the conclusion that that yoke is preferable to the burdens we are already bearing, the burdens of sin and pride and self-obsession and fear and insecurity. Jesus offers us none of these. Instead he offers us himself.

But we also need to go one step further, because the burden of Christ remains a burden. We are invited to take something on. Faith is not an abdication of responsibility, and certainly not a release from the reality of being human. Faith in Christ is rather a

recognition that in the person of Jesus the reality of being human is transformed, and transformed not by my efforts, but by the grace of God. So the yoke which Christ encourages us to take on is a yoke which brings refreshment because it is not ours alone. The burdens and the struggles which turn us in on ourselves, which frighten us into the recesses of our inner lives, the aspects of each of us which we are so determined to keep in the dark – these burdens and struggles belong not only to us but also to God, and because they belong to God they can never finally triumph. To use modern parlance, the burdens which we thought were ours alone are literally owned by Christ.

The final point is almost too obvious to mention. Our burdens are shared by God himself. If we want to be Christ like, we must share the burdens of others.