

“Take my yoke upon you and learn from me ...”

Sermon for the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 5 July 2020
St Philip’s Anglican Church, O’Connor ACT Australia

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Zechariah 9: 9-12; Psalm 145: 8-14; Romans 7: 14-25; Matthew 11: 15-30

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

One of the most aggravating things for me during this pandemic, and now in the face of worldwide protests against white supremacy, has been the surge in conspiracy theories, chiefly in the US but also here. The virus is a hoax, we’re told; it’s yet one more plot from the deep state to unseat President Trump. And climate science is a hoax, too, along with evolution. Meanwhile JFK is still alive—Elvis too, no doubt. And then there are the anti-vaxxers including, I daresay, some of those 10,000 Melbournians who refuse to be tested for COVID-19. The anti-vaxxers, I think, just can’t bear the indignity of their exceptional families being counted among the common herd, and subject to the same rules as everyone else. They believe that being subject to statistics conveys a loss of status.

Conspiracy theorists feel like outsiders and want to be insiders, they feel like losers and want to be winners, they’re frightened of powerlessness and so they seek to preserve human agency at all

costs—they can't bear the loss of control that comes when you admit that stuff just happens. But, of course, today's misinformation pandemic isn't confined to conspiracy theorists.

Science denial is growing in popularity, and the refusal to believe settled history. Expert opinion meets stubborn resistance whenever it tells us something uncomfortable. It must be fake news! Social scientists describe this as 'motivated reasoning' or else 'confirmation bias', and it's well documented. Because, for all of us, human cognition is shown to be inseparable from the unconscious emotional responses that go with it. Sigmund Freud was right, at least to this extent: that we're not rational creatures, we sons and daughters of the Enlightenment.

But if Freud was onto this, so was Jesus in today's Gospel. There he lays out the heart of the problem for us and gives us a solution. He comes to us as anything but a rival, because to confront someone about their delusions will just get their backs up and achieve nothing—like all those fruitless debates with climate deniers and anti-vaxxers. Instead Jesus gently reaches out as you would to an anxious child, who needs first of all to be reassured, to feel safe: "Come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." He comes to us with those comfortable words that many of us remember from our childhoods, from *The Book of Common Prayer*—

words helping to teach us that Jesus loved us before he ever challenged us, and that we could trust him. Then he gives us a way out of this universal human dilemma by embracing us and drawing us into his own life of faithfulness to God: “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.” (Matt 11: 29-30).

Now, Matthew chapter 11, before today’s appointed passage, has been building up to this, with John the Baptist, the new Elijah, proclaimed as a game changer. There’s a new spirit of eagerness for God’s truth, for God’s kingdom, as Matthew tells us earlier in chapter 11. Jesus talks there about God’s kingdom now being seized upon eagerly, violently—of it being taken by force.

But Jesus knows what resistance this outburst of truth and transformation brings. So he gently reproaches the crowd for being like whiny children, refusing to be won over no matter what God tries. “John the Baptist was too strict”, Jesus says, “so you lot thought he was mad. But then you think that I’m too lax, and so you won’t take me seriously”. But surely they can see the evidence? “What about my works,” Jesus asks, with some irony—“surely seeing is believing”? But that’s not going to work either. Clearly this crowd is

in the grip of confirmation bias! Jesus knows that people will do everything they can to wriggle out of God's claims on them.

Smug sceptics are like this today—ever since Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who René Girard called the first romantic. Rousseau preferred the idea of a natural religion, without dogma and without priests. What he particularly couldn't bear was Jesus' offer of mercy, because accepting that would mean admitting that he wasn't an exceptional specimen, that he was just one more ordinary sinner. And self-righteous people are often like this: scandalised by the demands of faith, by the authority of the Church and its traditions, and in particular by the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox discipline of confession, which of course is also available to Anglicans.

Jesus teaches us that a resentful and rivalrous way of being has to be given up so that we can face reality, and especially face those unwelcome truths about ourselves. And with this dawning of self-awareness comes the possibility of change. Hence Jesus' approach in today's Gospel offering no affront to the fragile heart, inviting us to submit to *his* yoke, to *his* discipline, which will turn out to be a great relief. The burden of unremitting self-justification is lifted from our shoulders. We no longer have to be better than others, putting others down to build ourselves up. The breakthrough insight here is that Jesus' burden turns out to be lighter than the previous one.

Because, contrary to what well-meaning parents have long told their children, being Christian isn't about a morality meant to elevate us, but a mercy meant to liberate us.

St Paul certainly knew this, as we see in today's famous and very Freudian Romans passage. Paul testifies that his rational mind and his sensible will let him down, with his unruly unconscious making its presence felt: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but the very thing I hate."

And so it is more widely: ask an addict, full of self-reproach but powerless to reform; ask anyone who's lost their career or their marriage or their reputation because they did or they kept doing what they knew they shouldn't have done, and now wish they hadn't. St Paul speaks up for all of them, then, and for all of us, asking who can save us from this body of death or, as Fr Martin expressed it very astutely last Sunday, from this dead end. And of course the answer is a thankful turn away from darkness toward the light of Jesus Christ, as we're invited to do in today's Gospel.

Friends, we see this wisdom of Jesus prefigured in today's psalm, with its promise of grace and compassion, of mercy and generosity, reaching out universally—in our Zechariah reading, too, with its hope for a new king, and a new triumphal entry of God's grace into

Jerusalem, bringing an end to war, to captivity. And of course this Old Testament imagery reappears in the Gospels as Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem on the way to his cross. Because on the cross God's overcoming of fear and lies and self-delusion, with the rivalry and violence that comes with them, is revealed before the nations, to heal a world typically blind to the bleeding obvious, a world relying on violence and murder as the cure for its hurt pride.

And so, friends, things are different now. If the rivalrous, the proud, the anxiously stubborn, the invincibly ignorant can't see it, because deep down they fear that they've got too much to lose—if the self-proclaimed wise and intelligent can't see it—then Jesus tells them that they need to be more like infants: knowing the dependent nature of their condition, and their need for help.

Hence the right posture for us in our Eucharist today is to come forward in humility and thankfulness to the one who knows our hearts and who loves us better than we do ourselves, and to lay our burdens down, and then to walk away with a new set of possibilities—as the hymn says: “your bondage is freedom, your service is song, and held in your keeping, my weakness is strong”.

As for our wider world, a new and ironic vocation for Christians is emerging. Instead of an enemy to reason, as Enlightenment wisdom

would have it, the Church now finds itself as one of the few remaining champions of reason in an increasingly delusional age. And faced by a frankly dangerous climate of science denial, Christians need to step up and defend the claims of science, in a world where rivalry bends truth as Einstein showed that gravity bends light. The Catholic faith at its best has never divorced faith from reason. God knows, this is no time for us to forget that.

The Lord be with you ...