

Comfortable words

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Sixth Sunday after Pentecost (Year A) — 9 July 2023

Revd Martin Johnson

Zechariah 9:9-12; Psalm 145:8-14; Romans 7.14-25; Matthew 11.15-19, 25-30.

Those of you who grew up in another era would be very familiar with some of the words we heard this morning in Matthew's gospel. In the *Book of Common Prayer* immediately after the absolution we would hear from the priest: *Hear what comfortable words our saviour Christ saith unto all that truly turn to him.* The first of these those words came from today's gospel: *Come unto me all that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you.* These words called 'words of assurance' do appear in our modern prayer book but are infrequently used today, a shame perhaps.

If you happen to look at the notice board in the sacristy you will see a series of prayers for vesting. These are used by the clergy and ministers as we prepare to celebrate the Eucharist. I am in the process of renewing them at present.

The first involves the washing of hands: "Cleans me, O Lord, from all defilement of heart and body, that I may, with clean hands and a pure heart, fulfil your work."

Putting on the alb, the priest says: "Cleans me, O Lord, that, made white and washed in the blood of the Lamb, I may serve you faithfully, and at last attain to everlasting joy."

Putting on the cincture: "Gird me, O Lord, with the girdle of your love, and extinguish within me the fire of all evil desire, that the grace of temperance and chastity may abide in me."

Putting on the stole: "*Grant me to so bear your yoke* and minister in your name that your word may never return to you void but may fulfil that to which you have sent it."

And the chasuble: "Clothe me, O Lord, with the robe of your righteousness, that trusting only in your merits, and resting in your love, all that I do may be acceptable to you."

The preparatory prayers then include, as an antiphon, words from the Psalms that "I may go to the altar of God, to the God of my joy and gladness" (Psalm 43: 4).

These prayers remind us that priests and ministers are witnesses and that should be "pure, upright, and blameless" in "our conduct . . . towards . . . believers," as Paul writes to the Thessalonians. Saint Paul reminds Church leaders in this letter to the church in Thessaloniki that we should not burden anyone while we proclaim the Gospel of God. Vestments should make ministers anonymous, so that what I wear and do, is not about me, but about Christ and Christ's work for us in word and sacrament.

Of course, this is an ideal, it is true that sometimes I do have a head like a tree full of monkeys, but my vestments are a constant reminder of my role. The same applies to the wearing of clerical collars. Many of my colleagues shy away from wearing clerical collars and shirts in the marketplace. I believe we should wear them because it provides pastoral opportunities, and it may offer the chance for some to share the criticism that the Church often deserves or at least needs to hear.

Today Paul describes the way that I sometimes feel when I am out and about. His inner turmoil has been the subject of much debate; everyone from Augustine to Freud have had something to say about Paul and his subconscious. He of course knew nothing of this, let alone modern psychology, and this text left in isolation doesn't help us understand Paul's wrestling. Those who are charged with the responsibility of setting exam questions for

theology undergraduates know this, that is why they set questions like — ‘who is the wretched individual, the miserable creature of Romans 7:24.’ It is only when we turn the page to chapter 8, we understand that Paul is seeking freedom from that turmoil and it is only ‘in Christ,’ that favourite expression of his, that he can find it. This is important: our vestments and clerical attire offer a freedom. They free me from the concern that it is all about me. It isn’t. It is about Christ in word, in sacrament, in thought and deed.

It is commonly observed that behind many of the political and cultural issues that we face today there are impoverished conceptions of freedom. So, wrote a commentator recently and I think this is very true. What many consider to be freedom today is really a form of radical individualism. The expression ‘my God-given freedom’ is often bandied about. But today we are reminded that the kind of freedom that God gives, in Christ, is quite different from that which we might imagine. When Jesus says take my yoke, I don’t picture Jesus lifting a yoke from his own shoulders and placing it on ours. I imagine us being yoked together with Jesus. The only true path to freedom is to let oneself become yoked to the love of God. For Paul this yoking together is what he means when he speaks of being ‘in Christ.’ Paul seeks a freedom from individualism, from his ego, to use a Freudian term. And the Jesus of Matthew’s gospel demonstrates what that looks like.

What of the first reading this morning from Zechariah? It is a passage that we would normally hear on Palm Sunday. What relevance does it have when seen through the lens of the other readings? Well, the King arriving on the donkey is the same Christ who offers us his yoke. In both cases, he is described as humble of heart, gentle, lowly, of having a modest opinion of oneself, of having spiritual poverty. This is the mark of us who know that alone we can never be all that we are called to be. But it is as part of the Body, the Church, that we are made whole. Yoked, as were to Christ, all of us called to be a part of this priesthood of all believers. I pray that we may we all find assurance from these comfortable words. Amen.