

When the going gets tough

When I was very young, I remember that phones had dials. You had to stick your finger into the little round holes and manually move them to connect to the number. My parents used to talk about a time when phones came in two pieces. You had to crank a handle on the side of the phone and hold up the earpiece, and wonder of wonders, you would be connected to an operator. A real human being sat in an exchange somewhere and physically connected lines on a switchboard. When push-button phones appeared, the chronically impatient could save a whole 10 seconds or so before they were connected to the person they wanted to speak to. These days, my cellphone has a voice activated dial. I just have to say the name of the person I want to call, and bingo! I'm talking to them. Or perhaps to one of the other 10 people whose name sounds slightly similar.

We are a society in love with the urgent. We feel comforted when we are able to shave even seconds off our tasks. I don't imagine that we're somehow lazier than we once

were. But we do seem to believe that we are running out of time. Our commitments are increasing; we don't see an end to the things we have to get done, and there is always something else rising up to claim any spare minutes we have. Life today is not so much about living in the moment as desperately trying to live in the next moment. It's as if we exist in a state of bewilderment, forever trying to figure out what we're missing. When we are exhausted at the end of a long working day, we automatically switch on the television or we surf the internet or we look for some other distraction, some way to keep on constantly moving. Almost without recognising it, we squeeze out the time for reflection, or silence, or just standing still and watching.

This passage in Matthew offers some gentle words of comfort and promise from Jesus. "Come to me, all you that labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

I was waiting for a Warrant of Fitness recently and a TV programme was playing in the corner. A monk was being

interviewed by a young, slightly aggressive presenter and I idly tuned in to hear the conversation.

Interviewer: Are you telling me you never get angry?

Monk: Well, I do, of course, but I just choose not to act on it.

Interviewer (incredulous): So if you're driving and someone cuts in in front of you, you don't honk your horn at them or swear?

Monk (smiling): No. Before I act on my anger, I just think, "What will this change?"

It's a good question. What will all our relentless commitment to busyness, our struggle to shave time off our tasks, our drivenness, actually change?

Jesus has been addressing the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum with some exasperation in the passage that precedes this. They are stubborn and pig headed, and resisting drawing the obvious conclusion from his ministry among them. Even the Gentile fleshpots of Tyre and Sidon – even Sodom, for goodness' sake! – would have repented long ago if they had seen even an inkling of who Jesus was.

Then suddenly he changes direction. Matthew marks it by saying, "At that time Jesus said..." I would love to ask

Jesus just what triggered the change. Did he notice a facial expression, did he experience a change of feeling tone, or did he simply remember his own parable? The one about the reckless sower who doesn't care where the seed falls or what it produces, leaving the outcome to God. We just don't know. But then Jesus changes the focus to those who are able to hear and receive what is being offered and makes that haunting promise of comfort.

What did those words of Jesus change?

If you ask the burdened people, or the driven, or those overshadowed by anxiety or high expectations, any of these who have come to Jesus down through the ages, they will probably testify that those words changed everything.

St Augustine recognised the same basic pattern of human life 1600 years ago. "Oh God," he said, "you have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find their rest in you." The relentless wanting is not new. As human beings, we seem to be hardwired to keep looking for new toys in the toybox. They hold our attention for a while, but we quickly discard them. Nothing in the toybox will ever satisfy us, and there comes a time when we have to put it away and look instead to Jesus as that still point in our turning lives.

Read Matthew 11:28-30

Notes on the text

Our previous study focused on disciples in mission (Matthew 10). After that Jesus is provoked to speak sharply about his mission in response to a question from John the Baptist (11:2-24).

A softer tone is found in 11:25 when Jesus commends those who have received his message. This leads to a statement about his own intimate relationship with the Father, delivered in a form which reminds us of John's Gospel. An equality between Father and Son is expressed. Thus Jesus in relation to his disciples makes claims and offers comforts which are the claims and comforts of God. So when we hear 11:28-30 we hear the Son who speaks with all the power, authority and love of the Father.

When Jesus says 'Come to me', who is being invited to come? Everyone! Jesus says 'Come' to 'All you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens'. 'All' seems to be more than his disciples. Jesus is addressing the crowds that have been listening since 11:7 - this invitation is given to all humanity.

What does Jesus offer the weary and burdened?

'I will give you rest.'

The word 'rest' is a word which repays looking at its history in order to understand the promise it conveys. 'Rest' relates to the Sabbath, the promise that after six days of work, there will be a day of rest. It connects with the promise of a better day for Israel after the burden of slavery in Egypt. A future rest awaited them beyond the Jordan River, in the promised land of milk and honey. When Israel faced the savage fact that they had lost the promised land through exile (721 BC, 587 BC), there was talk in Jesus' own day of a new age of 'rest' for Israel.

Some of that talk would have been heard in terms of throwing off the weariness and burdens of being under oppressive Roman rule. But Jesus' kingdom is not a simple antidote to the rule of Rome.

In this kingdom there is true rest ('rest for your souls'), provided by a gentle master. This true rest is not a life of indolent lazing but a life lived in the way of Christ, symbolised by the 'yoke'. A yoke joined two beasts together (often one a 'senior' and the other a 'learner') to pull a plough or turn a millstone. Christ will be the senior, each disciple will be yoked to him as a learner, 'Take my yoke upon you and learn ... my yoke is easy and my burden is light'.

First, this speaks to the crowd. Life is full of burdens. There is another way, Christ says. Secondly, the images here speak of the way of righteous living in those days. 'Heavy burdens' reminds us of the burdens of religious observance placed on people through contemporary teaching about the Law (23:4). 'Yoke' was a symbol of the Law. Jesus takes the symbol and transforms it. In the new age he brings, his way of life is 'easy' and 'light' compared to what contemporary rabbis demanded.

Yet we could hear all this as all about us. Here, so to speak, is a lovely and loving promise of a better life. But there is something we should not miss. It is the answer to the question why Jesus can make such a promise. 'I am gentle and humble in heart.' That statement is worth a long pause.

Sometimes Jesus appears elsewhere in the gospel, indeed in this very chapter, as a demanding and combative master. But the appearance is not a good guide to the reality: Jesus is gentle and humble in heart. We can come confidently to him as one who cares for us.

Questions

- What strikes you most about this passage?
- Can you remember any situations when you felt Jesus' message of rest applied to you?

- What does this passage tell you about who Jesus is and why we follow him?

Prayer together

- Spend some time in silence reflecting on what is challenging and encouraging in this study.
- As appropriate share requests for prayer together.