

## **Fifth Sunday after Pentecost** **5<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

**The Rev'd Colleen Clayton**

**Text;**

Matthew 11:15-19, 25-30

A woman gave her son two shirts for his birthday. One was a beautiful, sky blue, the other, a warm terracotta orange. He opened the parcel and was delighted with them! His mother urged him, *Go and try them on!* So, he did. A few minutes later, he came back into the room wearing the blue shirt. His mother looked at him and then exclaimed, *Why don't you like the orange one?*

Although the son appreciated both shirts, he could of course, only wear one at a time. The mother in that story would not have been happy whichever one he had chosen. There is something of a similar feel to this story in today's Gospel reading. The people have accused the sober John the Baptist of having a demon, and the joyful Jesus of being a friend to sinners. They are never going to be happy with either of them. God is at work right in front of their eyes, but they take offense and will not get involved.

People are very good at finding reasons to take offense when they want an excuse for avoiding God. Almost always, the offense involves blaming someone else. In churches, it can centre around the priest. Our church doesn't grow because the priest, doesn't do enough pastoral care, doesn't understand how we do things here, doesn't wear vestments, does wear vestments, is too radical, is a woman. Equally, it can centre around other parishioners, they never help out in the parish, they are involved in too many things, they don't understand how we do things here.

If we are looking, we will find many reasons to take offense at others and thereby avoid really seeing each other as fellow children of God, called to God's mission in the world. To come to a superficial characterisation of others, to assign them to a stereotype or a group, takes far less energy and commitment than truly getting to know them, coming to understand and respect the ways in which we differ, and learning to value their unique God-given gifts. John the Baptist and Jesus were very different men. They both had crucial roles to play in God's mission of love.

It hurts to be rejected simply because of who we are, to be misunderstood, to have assumptions made about us that don't describe who we really are. Wearing a collar, this is an experience I have quite often. People assume that, because I am a Christian, they know what I think on a wide variety of topics from same-sex relationships to politics. Some of my male colleagues have described far worse assumptions that are attributed to them. Since the Royal Commission into Institutionalised Child Sexual Abuse, men I know have been abused in the street and even spat at simply because they could be identified as a priest. This is a horrible experience. It is also far more common that we might like to think. Many Moslem women experience daily abuse because they wear a headscarf. Many indigenous people experience systematic harassment and destructive assumptions simply because of their racial identity.

Often, the prejudice and the offense are presented as being perfectly reasonable and therefore they go unchallenged. People are good at finding reasons to distance themselves from others and from God. Let me read you a list I found recently.

### **Reasons I Never ~~Go to Church~~ Shower**

1. I was forced to shower as a child
2. People who shower are hypocrites. They think they are cleaner than everyone else.
3. There are so many different kinds of soap. I could never decide which one was right.
4. I used to shower but it got boring, so I stopped.
5. I shower only on special occasions like Christmas and Easter.
6. None of my friends shower.
7. I'm still young. When I'm older I might start showering.
8. I really don't have time to shower.
9. The bathroom is never warm enough in winter or cool enough in summer.
10. People who make soap are only after your money.
11. I get along very well without showering.
12. I work hard all week and I'm too tired to shower on the weekend.
13. The first bar of soap I ever used gave me a rash, so I haven't gone near soap since.

I'm sure that, like me, you have heard many of these excuses offered as apparently sensible reasons for people not attending church. It is only when they are applied to showering that their silliness becomes apparent. In reality, unless there is a desire to come to church, people will not come no matter what. The same is true of responding to God. Unless our hearts, eyes and ears are open, and we are willing to respond to God at work in our own lives and in the lives of others, it will not matter what God does, our lives will not be transformed.

Jesus says, *To what shall I compare this generation?* God's truth is being revealed to them and they refuse to see it. We live in a world of *alternative facts* where truth is increasingly presented as debatable. We live in a world that seems to prefer to take offense than to accept God's love with the demanding work of transformation to which that love calls each one of us.

Jesus says, *Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.* We are called to grow in God's wisdom to see and hear where God is at work in the world, in ourselves, in each other. That is not likely to be amongst those that the world considers to be the wise and intelligent, but amongst God's little ones, the ones at whom it is easy to take offense and who we may not like. Our deeds demonstrate true wisdom when we act in ways that are open to being surprised by the God who is never what we expect, who doesn't behave the way we think God should and who consistently welcomes people that we would rather not.

Today's Gospel reading finishes with Jesus saying, *Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 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.* They are beautiful, comforting, familiar words. They also use the imperative. Jesus says, *Come! Take! Learn!* He doesn't say, I think you should consider coming to me, and it might be a good idea to take my yoke upon you and there are a couple

of things you might be interested in learning. This is not a *servicing suggestion*. Jesus really means it. He is exhorting us to wisdom.

To take Jesus' yoke upon us means to be joined to Jesus so that he guides us every step of the way. It is walking side by side with Jesus and living in his way that frees us from the burden of constantly taking offense, that liberates us from the heaviness that comes from living separate from God and from each other. Sharing Jesus' yoke lightens burdens and gives rest to the souls of the weary and the heavy laden. It enables us to go about things the way Jesus did, to live lives that are whole-hearted, gentle, vulnerable, peaceful, humble in heart, forgiving.

Let anyone with ears listen. Amen.