

SERMON – 9/7/23

Matthew 11:25-30

Jesus said, "Come to me, all you who are tired from carrying heavy loads and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)

People get tired for all kinds of reasons – there is the physical tiredness that follows strenuous activity whether that activity is undertaken by choice and for enjoyment (like a run or a game of tennis) or whether it is a labour imposed upon you (like house-work or gardening perhaps); and there is the kind of mental weariness that comes from having to juggle too many demands on your time or having to try and do too much with too few resources. Sometimes you know that you are tired and that you need a good night's sleep; sometimes you are too tired to be able to sleep and you lie awake watching the night hours pass painfully slowly. Sometimes you actually don't realise that you are tired because burdens have been laid on you gradually and you have just grown used to carrying them and stooping under their weight.

Are you tired today? Physically tired and needing a holiday, mentally burdened and needing to lay something down, emotionally weary because of the responsibilities laid upon you, spiritually worn out and needing refreshment. "Come to me, says Jesus, all of you, and I will give you rest."

In the context of our reading this morning, the Twelve have just returned from what would have been an exhausting mission, physically, emotionally, spiritually; John the Baptist, languishing in prison and perhaps wondering if he has completely wasted his life, has sent his followers to ask Jesus if He is the One who was to come or if they should expect someone else; perhaps even Jesus Himself is weighed down – we're told that even the towns in which most of His miracles had been performed had not turned to God. There is a weariness at this point in Matthew's Gospel which chimes well I think with the attitudes that are apparent in a world in which terrible conflict and the climate emergency threaten to quash hope, in a nation where the cost of living crisis and the damage done to so many areas of life by all that

accompanied Covid, in a church in which the future looks very different from the past.

We have read just a few verses from the Gospel this morning but here Jesus speaks very simply and very powerfully and I want to encourage you to pause with me as we reflect on four statements that I believe have something important to say to us all in these days.

The first thing to note is that Jesus begins not by speaking to His disciples but by speaking to God. "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth." Echoing the pattern of the prayer He taught the Twelve – our Father in heaven – Jesus comes both intimately to a dear parent (like the psalmist's contented, well-fed child on its mother's breast) but also reverently to the almighty Lord of heaven and earth. It is one of the most notable aspects of Jesus' life and work that it was utterly soaked in prayer, from the early morning (and sometimes all-night) conversations He had with God during the early days of His Galilean ministry to the spiritual wrestling match of the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before He died. Jesus lived and breathed a prayerful communion with God and if we are to learn anything from that it must be that Jesus' call to us to rest, is in fact a call to prayer, the ultimate and most basic acknowledgement that God is in charge. God is the One in whose enfolding care we can quiet ourselves, the One who reigns, as we sang, 'where'er the sun does its successive journey run.' To whom else would we go, for the security and peace of perfect rest? Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you.

Secondly, and continuing in prayerful submission to God, Jesus gives thanks that God has shown to the unlearned what has been hidden from the wise. Here we are reminded that God's thoughts are not our thoughts and God's ways are not our ways. Jesus teaches us that when we seek first God's rule and righteousness everything else we need will fall into place. Of course that does not sit well with the spirit of the age which points us to the scientist or the politician or the media for the last word on whatever matter is under discussion. The reality is that there are no simplistic, black and white answers to the challenges of life

and our faith calls us in another direction, to walk, child-like, where God leads.

The apostle James teaches that "if anyone lacks wisdom, they should pray to God who will give it to them because God gives generously and graciously to all." (James 1:5) For all the words that are spoken in parliament and in the media, at kitchen tables, in workplaces or in the public square, I wonder how many of them are words of prayer? In all the seeking after answers to this world's troubles, I wonder how much seeking after God there is? Jesus' call to us to rest is a call to trust God more than we strive for worldly, human understanding. God's call to us to rest, is a call to us to ask above all for heavenly wisdom.

The third point Jesus makes is this (and in the greater unfolding of the Gospel message this is probably the most significant): it is through Jesus Himself that God is known. Last week we pondered Jesus' words, "Anyone who welcomes you welcomes me, and anyone who welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me." In a sense we are looking here at the same connections but from the opposite perspective. Jesus teaches here that "No-one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him." (v.27) In these days of religious pluralism where secularists are succeeding in persuading the masses that faith is a mere lifestyle choice which may be privately tolerated but should not be publicly celebrated, it is worth noting that the quest for the spiritual and dissatisfaction with the material has never been stronger. People of all different backgrounds are looking for meaning, and we should not hesitate to be out there proclaiming the distinctively Christian insight that long before any of us ever look for God, God is looking for us, seeking out the lost sheep, sending Jesus to reach out to us while we were still mired in our own mess. The fact of the matter is that people will search for the spiritual in all kinds of ways but we will only truly find God in the person of Jesus Christ, who, Paul tells us, is the image of the invisible God. Jesus' call to us to rest, is a call to quit our struggling for achievement and our striving after the answers, to open ourselves to *His* coming to *us*, and in Christ to find God.

Which takes us to the promise Jesus makes, finally, that when we come to Him, willing and ready to lay down our burden, He *will* give us rest. For each one of us the burden may take a different form. For many, this time of year is a time for leaving behind the burdens of employment or of keeping house, a time of holiday for rest and recreation. If that is the nature of the heavy load you are carrying just now, then may you find rest this summer. In the turmoil of extraordinary times in global, national and church history, many are carrying a heavy load of anxiety and fear about the future about which we all need to gain a bit of perspective, in fact an eternal perspective.

I often reflect on words of the apostle Paul to the Philippians about our citizenship as Christians being in heaven, not primarily of any earthly nation or any institutional church. The kingdoms of this world shall become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ. If you feel the weight of anxiety that is being experienced by many in society and in the church at this time, then may you find your rest in Christ our true and eternal King. For all of us, there is a fundamental need to lay down the burdens of sin and guilt, the baggage that we carry because of our flawed humanity, and to accept the rest and peace that comes from the assurance of sins forgiven and guilt taken from us by Christ, through His sacrifice on the Cross. If that is a heavy load that is weighing you down this morning, then may you find the peace that passes understanding as you accept the pardon Jesus is holding out to you afresh this morning.

The message, then for today? Is there a word from the Lord to those who are weary, physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually in these tumultuous times? Oh yes, and it is not rocket science. Trust in God, my friends. Which of course takes us back to prayer, the primary resting place to which we are called. If we truly trust God, then let us pray to Him not only for ourselves and for one another but for the leaders of the nations and for those who hold office in the church that we may all rest like weaned children in their mother's arms, like children of God in the most intimate embrace of our heavenly Abba, who is none other than the Lord of all. Let us pray for the wisdom that comes from heaven which James tells us is "first of all pure; then peace-

loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere" (James 3:17) and which reveals the invisible God to us in the face of Jesus.

"Come to Me, says this Jesus, all you who are tired from carrying heavy loads and I will give you rest."