

The Fourth Sunday after Trinity

Collect: O God, the protector of all who trust in you without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: increase and multiply upon us your mercy; that with you as our ruler and guide we may so pass through things temporal that we lose not our hold on things eternal; grant this heavenly Father for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

Zechariah 9.9-12: Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. ¹⁰ He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim and the warhorse from Jerusalem; and the battle-bow shall be cut off, and he shall command peace to the nations; his dominion shall be from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth. ¹¹ As for you also, because of the blood of my covenant with you, I will set your prisoners free from the waterless pit. Return to your stronghold O prisoners of hope, today I declare that I will restore to you double.

Matthew 11.16-19, 25-end: Jesus spoke to the crowds about John the Baptist: 'But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the market-places and calling to one another, ¹⁷ "We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn." ¹⁸ For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, "He has a demon"; ¹⁹ the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, "Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!" Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.' ²⁵ At that time Jesus said, 'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; ²⁶ yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. "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."

Reflection: There are many references in Isaiah to the yoke of the law and how religious people could make it burdensome especially for the most vulnerable and poor. Leaving people to always feel guilty, to feel bad about themselves and never good enough. Behind the rules there was a God of love and of mercy; but somehow seeming distant and hidden. The virus has brought us many rules and behind them we recognise the science and the need to keep people alive. People have mainly complied with the rules but this has become less so as restrictions are lifted. Isaiah also wrote of the marketplace, encouraging people to come to buy and to eat and drink and to give to others generously. The law not seen to be a burden but to set people free. We find the same with our responding to Jesus who promised fulness of life for all shown in the ways of living that bring this about. In the parables we find analogies of this such as a woman searching everywhere for the money needed to keep alive; of a father coming out to meet the son who was lost.

For many weeks people have lived with lock down and its consequences. But what does this mean now? Getting back to normal. Jesus was not showing us a way that restored the normal. He instead questioned who the old normal had worked for and acknowledged who it had not worked for. This was the vast majority of the people: in his day widows, children, the poor, those excluded by the religious establishment because of the ways in which that establishment identified sinful behaviour and then excluded people from finding acceptance. So the mentally ill were excluded, orphans were excluded and those with physical scars from disease were excluded.

We may not agree on who the current establishment is but the economies of many nations including our own do work better for those who are wealthy rather than the majority of people, who do not have any real financial security, which is increasingly so amongst the young. Our economy leaves millions of people a month's wage away from poverty and the consequences of this in relation particularly to housing need and poorer health. There is no statutory safety net for housing but there is for health care and today we celebrate the birthday of the NHS. We celebrate the amazing work of those working in the health service including their very significant role since the Covid 19 pandemic began. We must not take it or them for granted and we recognise how social care provision has for too long been neglected with the challenge to bring this into a more integrated way with other health care provision.

Jesus in the parables tried to help people who listened to him to make good choices. And just as people responded to him then, today there are things we might learn and things we might decide not to. To learn to take each day as it comes. To take small steps, remembering where we are coming from and to live in the reality of the now as we face an uncertain future.

A faith community can provide a pattern of living to equip us and others for what is to come, to help transform community. In this we will need to work with others of similar vision and provide worship that will reflect this. And to ask many questions. These will include. Will we invest in our Churches in a more focused and energetic way? As a nation to ask what are our historic church buildings for? And if we recognise that they really should meet a variety of needs to ask who pays for them? What staff do we need? Who pays for them? The Church can help lead our nation in the coming months but it needs the resources to do this and the commitment of those who recognise what it does do and the potential of what it can do, to make sure it has the necessary resources, finance and the staff. Clergy and others making sometimes hard decisions, establishing new priorities and keeping together those who give their voluntary service to God in their local churches which enables God's work to be done. The work keeping of hope alive for all.