



THOUGHTS FOR SUNDAY
TRINITY 4
4 JULY 2020

My yoke is easy

Zechariah 9:9-12, Romans 7:15-25a, Matthew 11:16-19, 25-end

One of my college friends, with whom I have been speaking by telephone most days since lockdown began, is much exercised by the regulations governing lockdown, and the exact interpretation of what is and is not permitted. Exploring the subject with him has revealed to me the sheer impossibility of coming up with a comprehensive set of rules governing the minutiae of everyday life.

This is the problem that Jesus has identified at the end of today's gospel reading. A basic outline of the underlying principles had been given to the Hebrews in the Ten Commandments, but the Jewish theologians of subsequent centuries had gone on to expand those principles in ever more comprehensive and complex ways, many of which we have detailed in the Old Testament, but there are many others that were developed later in rabbinical disputation. The keeping of all of these regulations had become a full-time job in itself, and it was proving impossible for ordinary folk to live ordinary lives and still keep up to the mark with religious observance. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, reveals how it is the outsider, the Samaritan, who does the right thing, whilst the religiously pure folk offer no help to the victim of the bandits for fear that they make themselves religiously impure by doing so. The irony of the religious leaders' take on this is condemned at the beginning of today's gospel reading when Jesus points out that they are behaving like squabbling children. Both John the Baptist and Jesus were sent by God to preach repentance, yet the religious leaders of the day choose to ignore the former because he lived a life that was too ascetic for their taste, and must, therefore, be deranged, and the latter because he was not ascetic enough, and must, therefore, be a friend of sinners, and so a 'sinner' himself.

Jesus is encouraging the people to cast aside this burdensome yoke of ever more complicated regulations and to take on the much easier yoke that he offers, that of loving God and your neighbour (in which simple formula is enshrined 'all the Law and the Prophets').

I always have a sneaking sympathy for the priests and the 'scribes and Pharisees'. They had built up for themselves over many generations a religious institution that was congenial to them, but which also did seek to follow the way of the one true God, and which gave the people of the Hebrews their identity. But, on the way, they had fallen into the trap of thinking that the institution was 'the way' itself, and it had become impossibly burdensome to the majority of the people. In the church there is a very obvious temptation to do a similar thing and become, for example, so focussed on maintaining church buildings that there is no time for ministering the love of God to the people in the parishes.

Today's epistle reading, from Romans sees Paul struggling with an allied problem. He finds that his natural inclinations all tend to lead him to do destructive things, but that his 'inmost self', or his 'mind', call him to a different course, a problem for which he has no cure save turning again to 'God through Jesus Christ'.

The Old Testament reading from Zechariah gives us the image of the king coming, triumphant and victorious, a cause for great rejoicing in Zion and Jerusalem, but humble and riding on an ass. What are we to make of these contrasting images if not that humility is the real manifestation of greatness?

So all three lessons point in a similar direction. If we are truly to attempt to follow Jesus and draw close to God we need to focus on the essentials, God's love for us, and his desire that it be made known and apparent in the world, and let the other things take their place round that central objective. We must all have been doing this, three months into Covid-19 lockdown, by working out how we are going to interpret the regulations so that we can play our part, in whatever rôles we have, in keeping ourselves and others genuinely as 'safe' as possible. As, hopefully, lockdown regulations are eased this becomes more important, and more difficult, as we work out how we can contribute to human flourishing in its widest sense.

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