

# MATTHEW 11:16-19, 25-30

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Jesus said to the crowd, "To what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; 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." 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; 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."

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You're perhaps familiar with the ending of today's reading from the Gospel but the opening is difficult. The last line is one of the so-called Comfortable Words in what we know as the Rite I liturgy and they are part of every prayer book back to Cranmer.

So let me look at the opening verses. This generation is compared to fickle or bored children. Nothing interests them. They dismiss John as being too ascetic and Jesus as being too libertine. John is ridiculously gloomy and Jesus is outrageously engaged. In other words the people are bothered by the extremes. They don't want the doom and gloom of John and they dismiss the pie-in-the-sky-in the-great-by-and-by easy yoke message of Jesus. They want reality, nitty gritty political reality with compromise and an understanding of the real world. In the real world we have to make accommodations and they understand Jesus and John while having radically different styles as united in an unwillingness to accommodate themselves to political reality.

I think the church compromises itself when it accommodates political reality and doesn't preach instead a radically different way of seeing the world. There are as Jesus and John illustrate different styles of doing this but focus on the truth is key.

From 2000 to 2006 I took several Executive Education Courses at the Kennedy School of Government and learned from and got to know Ron Heifetz, the author of Leadership Without Easy Answers. Among the many lessons he gave us was the importance of figuring out what is really important and proclaiming it consistently. In his book he talks about how effective Martin Luther King, Jr. was in working with Lyndon Johnson, until MLK came out against the Vietnam War. Heifetz agreed that King was being consistent in his pacifism but he sacrificed the civil rights movement to the war.

Did he? I am persuaded that Heifetz is correct. Coming out against our involvement in Vietnam was a risky thing for a prominent political figure like King to do if he hoped to preserve any relationship, especially a working one, with Johnson. Of course if you, like me, saw the play *All the Way* it is clear that Johnson was committed both to civil rights and to political reality. At best Johnson and King used each other.

Does this have anything to do with the reception of John and Jesus? I hope so and I hope I can demonstrate my thinking. Each was single-minded. John preached a gospel of repentance and the need for even Jews to be baptized to demonstrate that they had changed their lives. Gentiles who wanted to become Jews were baptized but Jews never were. John changed that. He saw nothing of value in society as it existed. Jesus's message was focused on the kingdom of God and the responsibility we have to care for the weak so it is clearly the truth that he avoided the most important issue of his generation. That is, people were not so troubled by repentance, or even by healing or poverty; what they were interested in was being liberated from Roman Rule. The one thing Jesus consistently doesn't do or address is the political context of his generation. He was entirely consumed by proclaiming the inbreaking kingdom of God. Ironically he was crucified for political interference. Unlike MLK, Jesus knew what he was there to do and could not be persuaded to stray from his path.

The world continues to tell us that however we're presenting our message we're not doing it an appealing fashion. I wonder if that doesn't really mean that the world, ours in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as much as that of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, is really seeking to divert us by arguing about our packaging to distract us from delivering our message? Wasn't that what they were really saying in the opening of today's Gospel when they complain that John is too sober and Jesus not sober enough? In other words, we can disregard what you're saying because we don't like how you say it.

There's an ironic cartoon in a recent issue of the New Yorker in which a server says to the priest: *my parents would come back to church if you switched to Rose*. It's funny, it makes a point of how trivial many of our attempts to satisfy the formerly churched are and it is entirely beside the point.

My experience in nearly 41 years of ordained ministry is that if I am convinced of a change, and willing to explain why I support it then there is likelihood that you'll try it out. When I was the new rector of a small parish in Southern Maryland, just outside the Washington beltway, in 1979 I was given a list of former parishioners to call upon to see if I could persuade them to rejoin Christ Church, Accokeek. The husband of one family was very polite but said that they could not stand the 1979 BCP which at that time was being introduced. He asked how the people who attended were adapting to it? I responded that those who attended were adapting quite well and I hoped he and his extended family would give it a try. They did. They rejoined. They became very active. They simply had never understood why we'd changed the BCP and they felt the church had lost its focus as the custodian of good moral values. I changed the subject by saying that the role of the church is not to be the custodian of good moral values but to preach the gospel and ultimately they found that engaging.

To focus us again, what was the message of John the Baptist? It was simply that the path the generation was on was the path to perdition and if the people wanted meaning in their lives then they needed to repent and live an entirely different life. For Jews repent (shuv/ שׁוּב) means to turn around and live 180° differently. No repentance, as it is in Greek, of simply changing one's mind (metanoia/μετνοια). To repent is to change entirely. John said nothing about the presenting problem for Jews of his day; that is, he said nothing about Roman tyranny. He stuck a different harder to implement, message.

What was the message of Jesus? The Gospel is given to the weak, to children, and not to the wise. In other words the saving word is for those who desperately know they need it and not to those who prefer to spend their time debating the form and not the content. Jesus said nothing about the presenting problem for Jews of his day; that is, he said nothing about Roman tyranny. He stuck a different harder to implement message.

We get stuck on the presenting problem of our day and justify it as needing our attention more than caring about what John the Baptist and Jesus preached.

One of the slogans of AA is that *you can't be too stupid to get sober but you can be too smart*. It seems to me that this describes the Christian problem too. You can't be too simple to accept Christ but you can be too clever. Jesus refers to the wonder of not being too smart in the middle of this morning's Gospel reading. The goal of the church is to show us that all of us are simple and if we are to lead a life of meaning then we need to embrace, accept, and walk with the Gospel.

Thursday night I watched an intriguing film which I will only recommend to you after you and I talk about it. The name of the film is **The Brand New Testament**. It's in French and in it God dwells in an apartment in Brussels with his wife and daughter. Using his computer God determines our lives and for instance sets laws like, toast will always land on the floor jelly side down or dishes only ever break after being washed. In this movie God causes calamity, illness and tragedy to keep himself amused. That's absurd of course and none of us believe that of God. At least we don't when I say it so baldly. But many of us say it was God's will when a child dies or we say that whenever God closes a door he opens another one, or as in AA, nothing ever happens by chance in God's creation. That's determinism as invidious as that of the movie I watch. In the New Testament Jesus is inviting us to join him in creating the world. The point isn't that poverty, sickness and death exist either to test us or amuse God. The point is that they exist and we live our Christianity by refusing to accept the inevitability of them.

John the Baptist and Jesus were convinced that this was the most important aspect of life. For them life without God was life without meaning. They devoted themselves fulltime to proclaiming the Gospel, and they were both killed by those who were too smart, too realistic and too anchored in this world to accept their message. Are you?

Are you willing to lead a Christian life throughout your day? Do you live as if Christianity is the most important part of who you are? Or is the reality of life and the

compromises living in our world demand of you and me too much to take the church seriously? My youngest daughter doesn't attend church unless she's with me. However, she says that when she has children she'll join a church so that her children will grow up with a moral foundation. All well and good but it misses the point of being Christian. While leading a moral life is important it is not the point of being Christian. Many people who are not Christian lead amazingly moral lives. The point of being Christian is to show the world that faith in Christ gives you the foundation you need to live happily and blessedly in this world. We are not simply the conveyor of ethics to the world we are the hope of the world.

The core of this Gospel is that faith is not to the wise and intelligent but to those who are simple. The world demands a complex faith which demands of us that we practice a nuanced religion with clearly defined markers of who is in and who is out. The world demands that we address the presenting problems of our time if we are to be relevant. John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed a simple faith with ambiguity about who is in and who is out because what was really important was accepting that we are loved by God and as a consequence we are to love all of God's creation.